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Western Michigan University, christopher.maiytt@gmail.com

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DEEP IMPRINTS

20th-Century Media Stereotypes towards East Asian Immigrants and the Development of a Pan-Ethnic East-Asian-American Identity

by

Christopher Maiytt

A thesis submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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Thesis Committee:

Anise Strong, Ph.D., Chair
Victor Xiong, Ph.D.
Nathan Tabor, Ph.D.
Shu Yang, Ph.D.

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Christopher Maiytt

DEEP IMPRINTS

20th-Century Media Stereotypes towards East Asian Immigrants and the Development of a Pan-Ethnic East-Asian-American Identity

Christopher Maiytt, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 2019

Existing scholarship on ethnic representation in the American film industry most prominently features Black and Latinx subject matters, with little attention devoted to Asian American depictions. In contrast, this study tracks the use of persistent stereotypes in the American film industry directed at East-Asian immigrants and the influence American racism in popular media has on the emergence of a Pan-ethnic East-Asian American identity. The first appearance of a cooperative Pan-ethnic minority group materializes during the Yellow Power Movement of the 1960s, which is followed by the emergence of East-Asian film direction en force. Analysis of these films and in the historical events relevant to East-Asian identity are determined through cultural historical and social historical methodologies. In particular, symbolic interactionism and elements of social conflict theory are predominantly used in this work to interpret the complex messages within film entertainment and to argue for the significance of mass media as a platform of cultural and social identities. This work concludes that popular media is utilized to great effect to impart race as both a separatist ideology and a cooperative one, depending on the message the director intends. This work contributes to historical film scholarship by determining that East-Asian communities were active participants in the establishment of a Pan-ethnic East-Asian American identity and that they did so through the use of popular media as a means to disseminate their message.

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INTRODUCTION

Tires screeching, the occupants fled by car to the furthest reaches of the set's horizon. Gunshots rang out as the vehicle peeled headlong toward the vanishing point, forcing the viewers to squint their eyes and speculate if the car was still traveling forward. The sound of a wailing car horn followed by a piercing scream answers the question, and the characters quickly approach the vehicle to find the driver dead and her daughter in hysterics in the passenger seat. In these final moments of Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*, Jake Gittes, played by Jack Nicholson, reacts in stunned horror to the violence and police corruption that had set these events into motion. Angrily, a former friend and fellow detective who has benefited from the underhanded dealings of the Los Angeles Police force, Lieutenant Escobar, drags Gittes from the scene. "Forget it, Jake," he hisses, "It's Chinatown."[1]

The setting of Polanski's film was not incidental, nor were the emotionless faces of the Asian pedestrians that rush to take Gittes's and Escobar's place to survey the horror. Escobar's now infamous line captured the pervasive American attitudes of East-Asian ethnicity within America as a hallmark for senseless violence, incomprehensible culture, and permanent otherness. *Chinatown* was a neo-noir film, released in 1971. It was one of many that made generous use of 1950s-style noir films' stylistically contrasted lighting, plots based upon the subject of crime, pervasively cynical characters, and orientally characterized settings that were intended to convey a sense of mystery and danger. While film-noir and neo-noir each represented peculiar blends of World War II ethnocentric paranoia, responses to major changes in American ethnic landscapes, advances in cinematography representative of new generations of

[1] Roman Polanski, *Chinatown* (Paramount Pictures, 1974).

film directors taking the mantle, and depictions of East-Asian ethnicity and identity have historically appeared from the earliest American film to the present period.

This research aims to go beyond the commonsensical relationship of historical context, conflict, film, and stereotype, and instead to draw parallels to media and the tensions that resulted in the establishment of the pan-ethnic East-Asian American identity. While there has been increasing scholarship exploring Latinx and Black identities in America, there is very little work in comparison done on Asian stereotype and media history.[2] Even less attention has been paid to the direct relationship that popular media stereotypes had with the grievances addressed during the Yellow Power Movement of the 1960s. An understanding of these connections is valuable to elucidating on the emergence of East-Asian American film direction in the 1960s and the conspicuous efforts these artists made to present images of historical memory and community that would build the foundation for a cooperative pan-ethnic East-Asian American identity.[3] The final product of this study is intended to argue that the perpetuation of certain stereotypical motifs aimed toward ethnic Asian populations in America encouraged the development of a pan-ethnic East-Asian American identity and that film and television media played a pivotal role in how these cultural qualifiers were consumed and understood by the American public.

Major Works

To prepare a study of East-Asian American film depictions and East-Asian film direction, a large body of work needed to be included within the source pool. The films and television series that were utilized for this study were organized chronologically and for their significance or representation of major changes in East-Asian American identity. Some of the early major

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[2] Peter X. Feng, ed., *Screening Asian Americans*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002): 2.
[3] Peter X Feng, *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 1-5.

events in East-Asian identity in American history include the Yellow Peril Era (which was most apparent and dominant over Asian/American race relations from approximately the 1880s to the 1930s), and the era of Japanese Military Aggression (beginning in the 1930s to the mid-1940s). Some of the major works that receive extensive coverage in my research from these periods are Colin Campbell's *Black Roses* (1921), Sidney Franklin's *The Good Earth* (1937), John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Across the Pacific* (1942), and Howard Hawks's *The Big Sleep* (1944). Several films in the *Charlie Chan* film series are also given considerable attention, including *Charlie Chan in Paris* (1935), directed by Lewis Seiler and *Charlie Chan at the Olympics* (1937), directed by H. Bruce Humberstone.

During the post-World War II reconstruction and the Korean War period (1940s-1950s), and the Red Scare and Vietnam War period (1960s-1970s), films featuring ethnically East-Asian characters and subjects would begin to delineate from their depictions of East-Asians based upon gender. Works like Daniel Mann's *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956), Roger Corman's *She Gods of Shark Reef* (1956), Joshua Logan's *Sayonara* (1957), and Richard Quine's *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) are all important examples of this date range. Overlapping with this same period were some significant reversal in American immigration policy that triggered a reimagining of East-Asian immigrant communities and their places in society. Public media weighed in on these topics with pictures such as Samuel Fuller's *The Steel Helmet* (1951), Daniel Mann's *The Mountain Road* (1960), and Henry Koster's *Flower Drum Song* (1961).

Alongside the Civil Rights Movement, the Yellow Power Movement emerged in the 1960s, which was supported by media activists and filmmakers of ethnic East-Asian descent that were invested in using popular media to construct an East-Asian American identity. Their work began to be distributed in significant numbers in the 1970s, especially in the form of

documentaries, that straddled the divide between history, memory, and popular entertainment. Robert Nakamura's documentary *Manzanar* (1972) and *Wataridori: Birds of Passage* (1975), as well as Eddie Wong's *Wong Sinsaang* (1971), provide the most data for this period in this study.

Full-length feature filmmaking came increasingly into favor with East-Asian American filmmakers in the 1980s and 1990s. The pictures from this period would allow these directors to comment on East-Asian experience as Americans, either as members of their family unit or as minorities even within their own ethnic communities. Wayne Wang's *Chan is Missing* (1981), Michael Toshiyuki Uno's *The Wash* (1988), Lise Yasui's *A Family Gathering* (1988), Wayne Wang's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1989) and *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), and Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* and *Pushing Hands* (1994) were all valuable sources for tracking how the East-Asian American community oriented itself as a diverse and cooperative pan-ethnic group. These films could also be contrasted to other films by non-Asian filmmakers from the same period who continued to emphasize Asian identity as an "Outsider," such as in John G. Avildsen's *The Karate Kid* (1984).

An examination of filmmaking in the 21st century is more difficult to establish within a historical context as it is so close to the time of writing. What is valuable to the overall body of this work is to analyze how some of the most recent film and television depictions fit or conflict within the ongoing framework of pan-ethnic East-Asian American identity. Films and television examples, such as Justin Lin's *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002), Rob Marshall's *Memoirs of Geisha* (2005), Steven Yuen's contribution to the ongoing *The Walking Dead* television series (beginning in 2010), Cameron Crowe's *Aloha* (2015), Rupert Sanders's *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), and John Chu's *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) all have the potential to represent valuable areas for future scholarly inquiry.

While the major works chosen for this research are generous in number, they are hardly an exhaustive representation of all of the digital and film media on these subjects. Selection for the films which provided data toward this study's argument were based upon the relevance to the time period the films were produced or endeavors to promulgate a particular image of their subjects. Some of the media chosen was based upon previous scholarship which had explored these sources but had not made the same connections or that which had explored the sources in conjunction with some of the others chosen for this work. In other cases, source data was selected for the ways the films did not neatly fit within the narrative as a means of teasing out a more complete picture racial identity construction. Finally, some choices were initially a matter of random selection and viewing from databases of films from the appropriate time periods. The results of this random selection process allowed for the creation of a source pool that incorporated academically relevant materials, culturally significant works, and random control subjects which could speak to the legitimacy of the cultural and social theories purported by this argument.

Methodology to be Followed

The study of history and film is inherently interdisciplinary in nature, incorporating theories from the humanities for critical analysis. While elements of art and film history, cultural history, and studies of gender all play an important role in this work, some of the most substantial methodologies are based in sociology. Symbolic interactionism in particular, which explores communication methods and symbolism created by individuals and social groups as a means of constructing symbolic worlds that then influence behavior and social order, determined the gathering and interpretation of data. The theory of symbolic interactionism argues that different forms of social identity exist. Social groups can arise spontaneously, but they can also be willfully created through the perpetuation of encoded messages in image and textual form.

The act of tracking these symbols and interpreting their patterns, in conjunction with social and historical context, is the means by which this theory was put into action.[4] The use of stereotypes in the American film industry formulated one kind of American identity, in which immigrant populations existed at the periphery and intrusions of outside culture was representative of social disorder and moral adulteration.[5] The later works of East-Asian American filmmakers to reinterpret the historical narrative of East-Asian participation within American society and as cooperative to general pan-ethnic East-Asian interests, especially in the previous absence of an existing harmonious East-Asian social identity[6], allows for symbolic interactionism to offer a meaningful interpretation. Film analysis and the study of racial symbolism in particular, within popular media studies has gained precedence in serious studies of culture and ethnic history.[7] It is for these reasons that both the choice of methodology and subject matter are well suited to contribute to East-Asian American historical scholarship.

Among the different ways in which scholarly film analysis can be approached in the study of ethnic identity, semiotic analysis also contributes to this research as both a methodology and a product of the time period in question. Semiotic film analysis is constructed around the argument that public media is the greatest contributor to common culture and understandings of morality, virtue, and value in conjunction with gender, ethnicity, and civil compatibility. Furthermore, a post-structuralist approach to semiotic film analysis, which emerged in media scholarship in the 1960s alongside the Yellow Power Movement, argues that popular media is

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[4] Dennis Wrong, "Adversarial Identities and Multiculturalism," *Society*, "Slogans and Dogmas of the New Age" series, 37, no. 2 (February 2000): 10–11.
[5] Helen Zia, *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000): 112.
[6] *Ibid*., 269.
[7] Matthew W. Hughey, "The White Savior Film and Reviewers' Reception," *Symbolic Interaction* 33, no. 3 (2010): 476–477.

capable of carrying multiple lines of political and social discourse at once. Careful analysis of these nuances, including the use of spoken and written language, changes to formulaic story arcs, or scrutiny in the choices to produce works of fiction v. nonfiction, all have the potential to communicate complex messages about the state of contemporary racial and ethnic atmospheres.[8] As a result, the theoretical analysis of each media source researched remains firmly rooted in historicity.

It is also significant to note the historical foundations of this project and the connections between the methods of inquiry and historical study. Edward Said's *Orientalism* was one of the earliest works of modern historical scholarship into studies on the Eastern world. His theoretical approach stressed awareness of the influence of colonialism and racial imperialism. His work argued that these factors significantly influenced both the development of Eastern world societies and the assumption of superiority that obscured historical objectivity in Western scholarship.[9] Film historians and scholars of East-Asian American identity have long made use of Said's theories to bridge the gap between film representation as simple imagery to more nuanced acts of political commentary and identity discourse.[10] Other interpretations of *Orientalism* in modern scholarship include considerations of increasing globalization, the legacies of militarized occupation, capitalist trade domination tactics, and histories of racial supremacy (from forces in both the Western and Asiatic worlds) as influential elements to the conceptualization of East-Asian Americanism in media history and documental social identity construction.

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[8] Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Post-Modern*, 1st ed., (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005): 93-98.
[9] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 1st Vintage Books ed., (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 226-228.
[10] Jun Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens: History, Representations, and Identity*, (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1995): 64-65.

However, Said's *Orientalism* should not be construed as the indisputable harbinger of modern East-Asian studies. Said's critique of traditional Orientalist scholarship[11] has been criticized for the general lack of the solutions he offers and the limited applicability of them to serve historical scholarship. Simultaneously, Said's critique of many major traditional Orientalists damaged the reputation of the field and discouraged ongoing scholarship. Said's work also blurred the lines between race and ethnicity through the politicization of his subject matter, by failing to note the significance of military contact between Europe and the Near East since the Crusades and the birth of scientific racism during the colonial period of the 19th and 20th centuries. The historical significance of these events is influential to the distinction often made by Western societies between East-Asian Peoples and those of Near Asia or South Asia. Furthermore, Said's *Orientalism* devoted an undue amount of credit to the work of scholars in perceptions of race and ethnicity across general society, and thereby displaced the role of politicians, artists, and other disseminators of rhetoric and media in the construction of social attitudes of race.[12] Rosalind O'Hanlon, a faculty member the Oriental Studies board of the Heyman Center for the Humanities, and David Washbrook, an instructor with the Oriental Institute of Oxford University, both argue that Said's contribution to postmodernist Orientalism scholarship is adulterated by the "mistaken assumption that Edward Said's work proves a clear paradigm for a history that transcends older problems of representation."[13] Therefore, it was imperative that this work avoided the pitfalls that have plagued other East-Asian studies that followed Said.

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[11] See John King Fairbank's *The United States and China*, Harvard University Press (1st ed., 1948) and Donald Keene's *Japanese Discovery of Europe, 1720-1830*, Routledge University Press (1st. ed. 1952).

[12] Keddie, Nikki R. "Women in the Limelight: Some Recent Books on Middle Eastern Women's History." *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 3 (2002): 553–73.

[13] Rosalind O'Hanlon, and David Washbrook, "After Orientalism: Culture, Criticism, and Politics in the Third World," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, no. 1 (January 1992): 142.

Publications in postmodernist East-Asian scholarship which have come to rely on Said's approach suffered from an over-emphasis on theoretical methodologies and a fixation on specific markers of power as the fingerprint of Western influence, such as social class.[14] Jun Xing's *Asian America Through the Lens*, for example, lauded Said's *Orientalism* theory as a "powerful analytical tool" to study American media examples of gender, politics, and racial class paradigms without explaining how media analysis was capable of imparting historical data.[15] Peter Feng includes some criticism of Said's *Orientalism* theory in his book, *Identities in Motion*. Feng argued that the use of stereotypes in film media as a part of a culture that becomes fixed and separate from a changing colonial/post-colonial society through repeated use indicates that colonial subjects as a self-fulfilled identity as an incorrect assumption. The existence of stereotype, according to Feng, is indicative of social struggle with racial friction and that its usage is designed to manipulate historical narratives.[16] However, Feng failed to discuss how stereotypes were used intraracially against ethnic minorities or how racial identity subsumed divergent ethnic identities in 1960s/1970s East-Asian American history. Without an understanding of the development of East-Asian American identity, Feng's cooperative racial collective seems to spring from the ether of 1960s America. Both authors provided a great deal of film analysis that was valuable to my own work, but neither explored much filmmaking or stereotype prior to the 1960s (with the expectation of some tangential references to the Yellow Peril stereotype or to generalized ethnic American film subjects), which leaves both with little historical foundation from which to base their assertions.

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[14] O'Hanlon and David Washbrook, "After Orientalism: Culture, Criticism, and Politics in the Third World," 142-146.
[15] Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens*, 64.
[16] Feng, *Identities in Motion*, 134-135.

My own work avoids some of the theoretical trappings of postmodernist Orientalist scholarship by tracking the persistence of social identity constructs (both self-imposed racial identity and constructed popular media renditions) over a century of American history. An understanding of the influence of popular media on historical events over large periods of time allows me to identify a foundation upon which these historical identities are built. Furthermore, by dividing my attention between European American and East-Asian American perspectives (through interracial film sources) this work is capable of avoiding repetitive and arbitrary revelations of incomprehensible data; by contrasting these narratives and examining how images of ethnic identities go through periods of erasure and manipulation to satisfy the changing historical context of their creators, this work remains firmly rooted within the realm of documentary analysis.

Symbolic interactionism and semiotic analysis additionally serve as methods of historical analysis in my work, both of which have roots in historical scholarship. The employment of symbolic interactionism as a method of academic scholarship is based on early historical identity politics, which was "inherent in the situation of the mid-twentieth-century individuals and was experienced much less intently by their grandparents."[17] While the search for cultural and racial identity emerges in many ways in the study of sociology, the time period in which the Yellow Power Movement and the manifestation of mass East-Asian film direction (and the symbolic messages in their works) are not coincidentally linked.[18] Similarly, semiotic film analysis as a methodological approach was more clearly delineated from the greater field of the humanities only within the last century. In the 1980s, this methodology was sorted during the divorce of

[17] Wrong, "Adversarial Identities and Multiculturalism," 11.
[18] Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens*, 40.

cultural studies from ethnographic research, which emphasized the difference between cultural material and empirical data. However, because of semiotic analysis' applicability to studies of media, communication, and culture, the infamous Frankfurt School of critical sociology and post-modern historical scholarship argued that the power of this method to compare and contrast narratives of dominance, resistance, and civil/social order indicated that cultural studies operated at all times within the scope of socio-historical context.[19] As a result, any critiques of method or subject for their historical applicability can be effectively mitigated.

Defining Stereotype

A stereotype can be defined as commonly held beliefs by one group of people that are generally applied to another in regard to the subject's moral behaviors, physical and intellectual limitations, and social standards. Stereotypes are typically circulated through mass media, which allow for the characterization of a group, be it by gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, or other delineations, to be shaped by the public and distributed onward. Historically, racial stereotypes in America can be either negative or positive in nature. Negative stereotypes justify the control and disenfranchisement of ethnic minorities through symbolic or direct appeals to white racial superiority, while positive stereotypes attribute the success of some individuals within an ethnic minority to race while avoiding meaningful consideration of systemic ethnic inequality. 'Positive' stereotypes like these are just as harmful to ethnic communities because they undermine the successes of people of color, they overemphasize racial differences (especially among different minority groups), they discourage active social engagement with identities, and they discourage support for minorities that still struggle under

[19] Kellner, *Media Culture*, 28-32.

the influence of systemic racism in America.[20] The acceptability and survival of racial stereotypes in media are notably virulent in societies in which cross-racial contact is limited.[21]

This is especially true for East-Asian ethnic minorities, whose population was controlled through immigration policies in the 20th century that denied access to Chinese women and nationalization to a broad range of Asian immigrants and maintained strict White-Asian population ratios. For the East-Asian American immigrants and their descendants, four stereotype archetypes have dominated American culture during this period, all of which have permeated popular culture and remained relevant (in varying degrees at different points in time) due to their proliferation in mass media entertainment. These stereotypes are the Yellow Peril stereotype, which characterized Asian immigrants as greedy and sexually deviant; the Perpetual Foreigner stereotype suggested incompatibility through exaggerated portrayals of cultural differences between European Anglo-Saxon Americans and descendants of the East-Asian origin; The Exotic Conquest stereotype reduced East-Asian women to standards of obedience, subservience, and sexual consumability for the fetishization of European American men; the Model Minority stereotype reversed some of the attitudes toward East-Asian ethnic exclusion by implying that East-Asian educational standards could be exploited through the promotion of technically-skilled immigrant labor for American economic gains, but the unidimensional depiction of East-Asian ethnicity continued to keep ethnic minorities at arm's length. While the Yellow Peril and Model Minority stereotypes are well recognized in Asian American studies, both the Perpetual Foreigner and the Exotic Conquest stereotypes are one I have first identified

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[20] Karin Aguilar-San Juan, "Linking the Issues: From Identity to Activism," In *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s*, (Boston: South End Press, 1994): 4.

[21] Srividya Ramasubramanian, "Television Exposure, Model Minority Portrayals, and Asian-American Stereotypes: An Exploratory Study," *Journal of Intercultural Communication* 26 (2011), https://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr26/ramasubramanian.htm.

in this work. Each of these stereotypes dominated over clearly distinguishable periods of time from the 1890s to the 1980s and shifts between them marked cultural responses to significant historical events in American history.

In the American film industry, East-Asian stereotypes have historically been disseminated in a number of ways. Common to filmmaking from the late 19th century to the 1960s, yellowface makeup was used by European American actors and actresses responsible for propagating messages about East-Asian ethnicity to American audiences. Yellowface makeup included the painting of an actor's skin and false prosthetics to mimic the epicanthic fold of the eye, as well as more exaggerated makeup for the purpose of highlighting a particular stereotype. The construction of sets, character costume, or "oriental" objects were also used to purport symbolic messages of Asianness. Typically serving as stand-ins for conceptions of foreignness, deceptive intent, or moralistic/ideological corruption, symbolic replacements for East-Asian ethnicity were common vehicles of East-Asian stereotypes in the first half of the 20th century.[22] Following the Yellow Power Movement, blatant racial stereotyping in American film media was no longer socially acceptable. However, historically absent casting opportunities for East-Asian American actors persisted, as Asian character roles continued to be filled by European American actors and actresses (known as white-washing). This lack of ethnic East-Asian representation, which denies East-Asian Americans the opportunity to share an authentic cultural and social

[22] Homay King, *Lost in Translation: Orientalism, Cinema, and the Enigmatic Signifier* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 4-5.

rendition of their experiences, remains a barrier to the elimination of East-Asian American stereotypes in contemporary American media.

Confronting and negating stereotypes circulated in American public culture and media was a significant element of the Yellow Power of the 1960s.[23] After the Yellow Power Movement and the mobilization of East-Asian American filmmaking in the 1970s and 1980s, these stereotypical archetypes continued to appear in fractured and overlapping forms, albeit increasingly infrequently. Arguments could be made in a further study that this is indicative of the successes of East-Asian American filmmakers to combat these images. However, it would be inaccurate to claim that works by ethnic filmmakers did not also perpetuate some flawed and exclusionary messages of East-Asian American identity.

British actor, Boris Karloff, starred as the infamous Fu Manchu in MGM's *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932). Fu Manchu's powers of mind control and manipulation made him a frequent villain in horror films that utilized the Yellow Peril stereotype.
Brabin, Charles. *The Mask of Fu Manchu*. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1932.

Defining "Asian American" Identity

It is significant to note who falls under the umbrella of the term "Asian American," both in American culture and how it is defined in this study. Previous to 1960, the words "Mongolian," "Oriental," or occasionally "Asiatic" were used to reference an Asian immigrant

[23] Zia, *Asian American Dreams*, 47.

or an ethnic descendant of East Asia. This included people from China, Japan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Korea, Mongolia, Malay, and India.[24,25] Before the word "Asian American" was coined by Yuji Ichioka in 1968[26], the previous terms could also be used to refer to those who were of Persian, Iranian, or of similar ethnic heritage as is typically referenced in today's language as Near Eastern or Middle Eastern. While the term "Asian American" is still flawed and increasingly forsaken for more specific language of identity, such as Chinese American or Filipino American, its emergence and usage is important for understanding concepts in media history and ethnic studies.[27]

For the sake of this study, the subject pool excludes Near Asian and the majority of South Asian populations. This choice is based on exclusivity granted to East-Asian populations during the Yellow Power Movement and afterward that debarred darker-skinned ethnic groups from identifying with the pan-ethnic Asian American collective.[28] The perpetuation of the model minority stereotype in the subsequent decades also overlooks historical events unique to South and Near Asian populations. Asian American scholars thus argue that "racializing [South Asians] as 'Asian'," muddies the historical narrative in ways that damage existing non-East-Asian ethnic

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[24] Jeffery Scott Mio et al., eds., *Key Words in Multicultural Interventions: A Dictionary* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 1999), 20.

[25] Recorder of minutes uncredited, "Collected 'Proceedings of the Asiatic Exclusion League'," originally published by Organized Labor Print, 1908-1913, 325.2506 AS 1908-1903 incompl., Library of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, https://archive.org/details/asiaticexclusion00asia/page/n1.

[26] Karen L. Ishizuka, *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties* (London: Verso, 2016), 61-62.

[27] Peter X Feng, *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 2-7.

[28] Karen Ishizuka argues that Filipino Americans were included within the Yellow Power/Asian American Movement, though she does confess that many felt ostracized within the movement due to complexion and the historical legacy of Spanish and American colonization over the Philippines. The annexation over Philippine Islands made the territory subject to the United States government but not citizens. As such, Filipinos often reported feeling neither American nor Oriental, and they occupied a place in American culture that often grouped them with other darker-complected ethnic groups from Near Asia and South Asia, which fractured into separate identity movements. For more information, see Karen Ishizuka's *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties* and E.J.R. David's *Brown Skin, White Minds: Filipino -/ American Postcolonial Psychology*.

populations.[29] It is for these reasons that this study emphasizes East-Asian cooperative pan-ethnic identity rather than a broad generalized "Asian American" identity. This differentiation is especially evident in East-Asian American filmmaking, which has historically eschewed casting of South and Near Asian actors or rewriting historical narratives of ethnic conflict between South/Near Asian subjects and East-Asian subjects.

The only exception to this rule in this study is the inclusion of Polynesian immigrants and their descendants within the source pool. Ethnically Polynesian peoples in the islands of Hawai'i and their subsequent citizenship via the granting of Hawai'ian statehood in the 20th century made them a significant subject in popular culture within the period of this study. Additionally, this region aroused anxieties of Asiatic ethnic intermixing, especially with Chinese and Japanese immigrants, which caused these descendants of South Asia to frequently be lumped together with East-Asian ethnicity in the American imagination.[30]

Early History of Exclusionary Immigration and Citizenship Policy

When examining an American sense of who the peoples of Asia were, it is important to understand popular media was often an introductory point of contact for Americans with ethnic East-Asian minorities before 1965.[31,32] The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 had aggressively restricted opportunities for Americans to make contact with Asian immigrants. The Chinese Exclusion Act was the first American law that would exclude a population based specifically on race from entering the United States as a means of limiting economic competition on the

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[29] Jonathan H. X. Lee, "Sojourn in Hong Kong, Settlement in America," In *The Chinese/Vietnamese Diaspora: Revisiting the Boat People*, ed. by Yuk Wah Chan, The Routledge Contemporary Asia Series, (London: Routledge, 2011): 133.
[30] "Collected 'Proceedings of the Asiatic Exclusion League'," https://archive.org/details/asiaticexclusion00asia/page/n1.
[31] Ramasubramanian, "Television Exposure, Model Minority Portrayals, and Asian-American Stereotypes," https://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr26/ramasubramanian.htm.
[32] Zia, *Asian American Dreams*, 113.

California Gold Coast.[33] More significantly, the 1875 Page Law that preceded the Chinese Exclusion Act banned Chinese women from entering the United States, which denied many Chinese already in the country the opportunity to form families.[34] Many Chinese men, as a result, remained single. Seeking companionship, Chinatowns emerged in large urban environments, populated predominantly by these single men. These areas were often imagined as bachelor societies, and subsequently sexually threatening, by outsiders.[35] The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 compounded the struggle for Americans to imagine Asians as their fellow citizens by denying any Chinese currently residing within the United States naturalization. Thus, by the end of the 19th century, Americans had limited pathways to witness Chinese immigrants participating in a family unit or as part of a complex East-Asian culture. By eliminating the path to citizenship, it became increasingly difficult to imagine East-Asians as an ethnic American cultural identity as well.

The legal restrictions on entry to the American labor market to Chinese workers were largely successful. Instead, American employers who had profited from the low cost of Chinese immigrant labor began encouraging Japanese laborers to come work for them. The majority of these workers arrived and settled in California, which again aggravated European American communities who blamed these new arrivals for unemployment and corrupt capitalist economic

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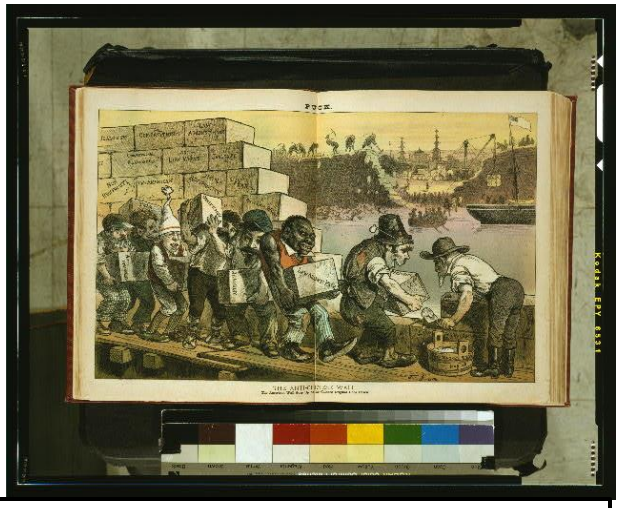
[33] Arthur Dong, *Hollywood Chinese: The Chinese in American Feature Film* (DEEPFOCUS Productions, 2007).
[34] Jonathan H. X. Lee and Christen T. Sasaki, eds., *Asian American History: Primary Documents of the Asian American Experience*, 1st ed., (San Diego: Cognella Academic Publishing, 2016): 25-28.
[35] Qijun Han, *The Cinematic Representation of the Chinese American Family* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 35-36.

policies. Concerned parties organized in San Francisco under the title of the Asiatic Exclusion League (AEL) in 1905. The main goal of the AEL was to extend the immigration ban to Japanese and Korean American immigrants. The members of the AEL were not alone in their concerns. In May of 1908, the Santa Ana *Blade* included their own assessment of Japanese immigrants in the American workforce. Their report concluded that the "Japanese will not assimilate with our people. They have undesirable trace characteristics, their ideas of morality are shocking to American idealists, and they come to learn our ways of doing things and to make money, and finally return home."[36]



This political cartoon by Friedrich Graetz was published in the American humor *Puck* magazine on March 29, 1882. It captured the predominance of Yellow Peril feeling of the late 19th and early 20th centuries among both the European American majority and American minorities who participated in the anti-Chinese immigration political activities. Graetz, Friedrich. *The Anti-Chinese Wall--The American Wall Goes up as the Chinese Original Goes Down*. March 29, 1882. Chromolithograph film. Illus. in AP101.P7 v. 11 Case X [P&P]. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/96500349/.

These reports were indicative of the nationwide public concern about Asian immigrants and the influential power of the Yellow Peril stereotype. The AEL, politicians, and other organized units of white laborers began lobbying to extend immigration bans to other East-Asian ethnic groups.

This is not to suggest that the opposition to East-Asian civil occupation preceded uncontested. As early as the 19th century, East-Asian immigrants had organized in civil rights groups such as the Chinese American Citizens Alliance, founded in 1895, and the Chinese Six

[36] Recorder of minutes uncredited, "Collected 'Proceedings of the Asiatic Exclusion League'," June 1909, 7 https://archive.org/details/asiaticexclusion00asia/page/n203.

Companies, founded in 1882. These organizations lobbied for Chinese equality and against the Chinese Exclusion Act as far as the Supreme Court. These efforts resulted in some successes, such as the *United States vs. Wong Kim Ark* (1898) which granted American citizenship to a man born in California to Chinese immigrant parents, and *Yick Wo vs. Hopkins* (1896), which prevented unequal enforcement of laws by race that was not explicitly attributed to a particular race, but these examples were nominal in comparison to the losses.[37]

The passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the most critical barrier to racial contact and to the perpetuation of East-Asian stereotype in modern America. While initially intended to be a temporary ban, it was made permanent in 1902. Efforts by Chinese civil rights groups failed to overturn the law via the ultimately unsuccessful Foster Bill, which was introduced to Congress in 1906. The bill was intended to repeal the earlier Chinese Exclusion Act on the grounds of increasing trade rather than promoting racial equality, but rampant anti-Chinese racism as the impetus for the law's existence was well understood by the American public. Among the Foster Bill's supporters were the like of Bishop D.H. Moore, who spoke before the Committee of Foreign Affairs. According to a report drafted by the AEL, Bishop Moore argued unsuccessfully to the credit of Chinese morality from his experience as a missionary.[38] The anti-Asian lobbying of the AEL came to further fruition with the passage of the Gentleman's Agreement in 1907, which denied Japanese American children the right to attend public school along with their European American peers.[39]

Ethnic minorities continued to push back against the tightening of civil liberties and public representation. In 1911, *The Seattle Daily Times* reported that three American-born

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[37] Zia, *Asian American Dreams*, 28-29.
[38] Recorder of minutes uncredited, "Collected 'Proceedings of the Asiatic Exclusion League'," March 1908, 7-8, https://archive.org/details/asiaticexclusion00asia/page/n25.
[39] Lee and Christen T. Sasaki, eds., *Asian American History*, 57-59.

Japanese men had registered for positions of office in a local city election in the interest of facilitating the legalization of an Asiatic American franchise. The tone of the report indicated the displeasure of the authors that at the time of printing no legal recourse had yet been determined to bar them from running, and that the citizens of the Washington town were prepared to take the issue to court.[40] Ongoing targeting of ethnically East-Asian communities continued, gaining further legal authority through the California Alien Land Law of 1913, which outlawed the sale or lease of agricultural land to Chinese, Japanese, and Korean immigrants. Likewise, the Immigration Act of 1924 was passed into law, which extended exclusionary immigration policies to all East-Asian immigrants. The arrival of any ethnically Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, or Mongolian peoples that would displace the ratio of European Americans to non-white populations of eastern origin below 100:2 were denied entry.[41] Ethnically East-Asian peoples who had already gained citizenship were not stripped of their status, but instead faced racism and violent pogroms.[42] The public support that allowed for the legal approval of these measures can be directly traced to the proliferation of the Yellow Peril stereotype in modern American history.

IDENTITY POLITICS IN THE 20TH-CENTURY FILM INDUSTRY

Depictions of East-Asian ethnicity in film entertainment predated classical Hollywood cinematography. Explorations of Eastern peoples and landscapes from the nickelodeon and silent film eras typically took on two common motifs. According to the film historian Stephen Gong, short films shot directly in Asia, and China in particular, introduced American audiences to some

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[40] The Seattle Times Company, "American Born Japs Desire Franchise. Citizens of North Yakima Intend to Bring Legality of Question Before Court," *The Seattle Daily Times*, January 25, 1910, Seattle Times Collection, Densho Digital Repository, https://ddr.densho.org/media/ddr-densho-56/ddr-densho-56-158-mezzanine-d8c9ec8400.pdf.
[41] Emily Anderson, "Anti-Japanese Exclusion Movement," Densho Encyclopedia, 2019, http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Anti-Japanese%20exclusion%20movement/.
[42] Ishizuka, *Serve the People*, 17-20.

of the world's oldest civilizations. However, these pictures competed for the public attention in an atmosphere already steeped in decades of Chinese persecutions, known as Yellow Journalism. Newspaper and comic visual media had already primed the American public to conceptualize East-Asian societies with the bizarre, the criminal, the indulgent, and morally depraved. Early films, such as *Massacre of the Christians by the Chinese* (1900), blended fictitious acts of violence with these culture exploratory films without distinction. These films were imbued with the drama that attracted viewership and brought Yellow Peril stereotypes to entertainment markets and the leisure pastimes of modern American culture. The other common East-Asian theme of early 20th-century film history was the depiction of Chinatowns as settings both fascinating and threatening. *The Heathen Chinese and the Sunday School Teacher* (1904), *The Tong Man* (1919), and *Outside the Law* (1920) are some examples, which featured opium dens and Chinese mob activities[43] as examples of the Chinese presence in

It would be misleading to assert that all European American filmmakers were complacent in the perpetuation of East Asian stereotypes. D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919) shocked audiences with its tale of a tender, although unreciprocated, love affair between a Chinese man and a young British woman. However, rumors of their relationship eventually lead the woman's father to beat her to death, which suggested that the virtue of white female racial purity was endangered by the mere presence of East-Asian racial minorities.
Griffith, D.W. *Broken Blossoms*. United Artists, 1919.

[43] For more information on this subject, see Scott D. Seligman's *Tong Wars: The Untold Story of Vice, Money, and Murder in New York's Chinatown* (2016).

America.[44] From its earliest origins, film entertainment was used to characterization East-Asian peoples as violent, sexually depraved monsters with an insatiable lust for money and European American women.

These stereotypical media portrayals were not perpetuated without confrontation. Prominent early 20th-century East-Asian performers took to the film medium to promote their own narratives. In Los Angeles, a cooperative group of Chinese businessmen financed a new film studio, James B. Leong Productions, to combat racism in Hollywood. Headed by the actor and film producer that gave the company its name, these works were principally about Chinese experience, and were devoted "to bring[ing] the Chinese into American life."[45] The popular Japanese American romantic idol and star of American films such as *The Wrath of the Gods* (1914) and *The Bravest Way* (1918), Sessue Hayakawa, did the same when he founded Haworth pictures in 1928.[46] A female film director, Marion Wong, also fronted a studio, known as Mandarin Pictures. Mandarin Pictures was only able to produce a single film before her company went bankrupt, *The Curse of Quon Gwon* (1916), about the culture clash between Chinese American women and their in-laws from the East. *The Curse of Quon Gwon* made history as the first East-Asian feature-length film ever made, but its legacy was long lost to history because it was never selected for production by a distributor.[47] Wong and many other East-Asian filmmakers in the early 20th century failed to garner the attention and support of the mainstream American audiences.

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[44] Dong, *Hollywood Chinese*.
[45] *Ibid*.
[46] Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens*, 18.
[47] Dong, *Hollywood Chinese*.

Audiences flocked instead to renditions of Asian culture and characteristics such as Colin Campbell's *Black Roses* (1921). Campbell's picture delineated the differences between early American 20th-century expectations of Chinese and Japanese ethnic virtues. *Black Roses* stared Sessue Hayakawa as Yoda, a talented Japanese architect. In *Black Roses*, Yoda takes a position as a gardener for a retired crime lord, Benson Burleigh. Burleigh's retirement is cut short when the former mobster is killed off his own criminal associates, and a Yoda is framed for the murder. Despite his innocence, Yoda makes an easy target for arrest. Once imprisoned, Yoda learns that a Chinese mobster, Wong Fu (played by a Japanese actor, Toyo Fujita), organized the plot. Yoda eventually escapes, aided by some of Wong's own collaborators. Yoda returns to the scene of the crime, now disguised as a Japanese nobleman of great social clout, and tricks the mobsters into revealing the location of Yoda's kidnapped bride. Reunited and free, the two turn in the criminals to the police.[48] The moral of the film, besides the typical platitudes of romantic love, was that the Japanese were believed to have more potential to assimilate to American society than the Chinese in the years prior to the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924.

Some famous East-Asian American[49] film stars chose other avenues to oppose stereotypical racial depictions in popular media. Anna May Wong turned down roles later in her career couched in stereotypical representations which vilified ethnically East-Asian peoples as manipulative and violent. Wong's position as one of the first female film stars imbued her with power and social mobility rarely available to women before the 20th century. With the

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[48] Colin Campbell, *Black Roses* (Robertson-Cole Distributing Company, 1921).

[49] At this time in history the term "Asian American" did not exist. The establishment of this identity term is discussed in greater detail later in the paper. However, the language utilized to refer to those whose ethnic heritage heralds from the Far East is often considered offensive today, such as the words "Mongolian" and "Oriental," and it is for that reason I do not make use of it in my essay. In other cases, these people were described only by their ethnicity, which is misleading. For example, please see Grace Kingsley, "'I Shall Marry a Man of My Own Race,' Says Pretty Anna May Wong." *Movie Weekly*, Unknown Date, https://i.pinimg.com/736x/66/dc/48/66dc488ea621fd7be9ed50bbf435f2fe.jpg. Anna May Wong, in contrast to the way she is described during her lifetime, was born in Los Angeles and was a natural born American.

emergence of celebrity social constructs also came media feminism, both of which Wong employed as a recognizable face in 1920s American culture.[50] At the height of her Hollywood career, Wong relocated to Europe and denied Hollywood access to her star power. Likewise, average individuals took part in the resistance against Hollywood by attacking film crews that came to Chinatown to film fictional scenes of Chinese extras smoking opium for the 1924 film *Pied Piper Malone*.[51] The protests against stereotypical renditions of East-Asian ethnicity attracted the attention of the news media as groundbreaking acts of feminism and racial protest in 1920s American cultural history.[52] The opposition to the production and propagation of formulaic East-Asian identities by the American film industry and audiences can be evidenced from the early twentieth century, but the establishment of a pan-Asian identity in the film industry would not come until the second half of the century.

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"I SHALL MARRY A MAN OF MY OWN RACE,"

Says Pretty ANNA MAE WONG

Dainty Chinese film star declares that happiness lies only with one's own people—Used to believe in devils, but does not now

By Grace Kingsley

Anna May Wong was an early East-Asian American rights activist. She used her position in public media as a platform to draw attention to racism in the American film industry,
Kingsley, Grace. "'I Shall Marry a Man of My Own Race,' Says Pretty Anna May Wong." Movie Weekly, Unknown Date, https://i.pinimg.com/736x/66/dc/48/66dc488ea621fd7be9ed50bbf435f2fe.jpg.

[50] Karen Sternheimer, *Celebrity Culture and the American Dream: Stardom and Social Mobility*, 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 2014): 4-5.
[51] Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens,* 21.
[52] *Ibid*., 19-20.

The Asian American film production efforts of Hayakawa, Wong, and Leong all came to an end in the 1930s. The Japanese wars of conquest in the Pacific reverberated across the globe through the dismantling of Asiatic cooperative-plot-driven cinema. In their place, white Anglo-Saxon American filmmakers devoted their energy to reversing the American cultural stance on Chinese/Japanese moral duality. Set during the 1911 Revolution in China, Frank Capra's *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933) centered around a wealthy Chinese military warlord who rescues an American female missionary. In classic fairy tale fashion, the General whisks her away to his palace and attempts to court her. The picture was one of the earliest to imply the possibility of an interracial relationship between a Chinese man and a European American woman, although she ultimately refuses his advances. Capra's bold attempt to sell a story of romantic tension across racial lines was made easier to swallow for American audiences by the casting of Swedish actor Nils Asther as General Yen, in yellowface. Nevertheless, *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* did poorly in the box office and received little critical praise.

Sidney Franklin's *The Good Earth* (1937) also made use of yellowface to promote a reimagining of the Chinese for American audiences. David Henry Hwang, a screenwriter and playwright whose legacy has been built on interpreting Asian American experience in the modern era, explained the legacy of *The Good Earth* in an interview for a Chinese American film history documentary. "In historical context, there was something progressive about *The Good Earth*," he said. "It tried to portray a Chinese family as completely human, as complex, and synthetic."[53] Set in the same time period as *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, *The Good Earth* tells the story of two newly-wed Chinese peasants attempting to survive the famine, droughts, and political turmoil of the Republican overthrow of the Qing Dynasty. The groom, Wang

[53] Dong, *Hollywood Chinese.*

(played by Paul Muni), and bride, O-Lan (played by Luise Rainer), are hard-working and diligent. With time, their farm and prosperity begin to slowly grow. These successes are not to last though. As the marriage produces children and the political atmosphere darkens, the family is forced to leave their farm to beg for food and to carry rickshaw riders in the city.

Once revolutionaries storm the city, the family comes into a great deal of wealth through looting, which allows them to return to their farm, to purchase seeds and livestock. While all seems well, the years of struggle have caused the couple's marriage to cool and Wang finds himself distracted by the beautiful Lotus (played by Tilly Losch) he watches dance at a leisure tea house. As O-Lan ages and her health begins to fail, Wang becomes increasingly distracted and takes the singular humble luxury O-Lan asked to keep for herself, a set of pearls, to fashion a gift for Lotus. It is only after her death that Wang considers the sacrifices and grace of O-Lan.[54] While the ultimate moral of the picture is largely ambiguous, the most obvious lessons are about Puritan work ethics and morality, and the ability of the characters to learn and embody them. The reframing of Chinese ethnic minorities in Hollywood was reflective of American government media to establish positive relations with the Chinese Republican government, which was facing a double-sided war against the Japanese Empire and Communist revolutionaries at the time of the film's production.

The film rendition of *The Good Earth* was based on a novel by the same name (1931), written by the daughter of American missionaries to China, Pearl S. Buck. Upon its release, the book was a national bestseller and the film rendition received similar acclaim, including the nomination for five Academy Awards. Film historians have referenced *The Good Earth* and its popularity to changing American public perceptions of the Chinese from villains to victims.

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[54] Sidney Franklin, *The Good Earth*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1937.

However, the use of yellowface makeup and prosthetics on well-recognized Hollywood stars Paul Muni and Luise Rainer minimized this effect.[55] The achievements of Franklin's counternarratives to the Yellow Peril stereotypes were limited by the general refusal of Hollywood to allow East-Asian actors to represent themselves in starring roles during the 1930s. Instead, East-Asian actors were typically cast as servants, slaves, opium-addicts, or background characters gathered into featureless masses.[56]

In reality, very few East-Asian actors were cast in *The Good Earth*, and even less were credited for their appearance in the film.[57] Some of the most notable exceptions were the roles given to Wang's two eldest sons, played by Ronald Lui and Keye Luke. Wang's sons serve as the foils of their parents in the picture, as the boys struggle with ethical dilemmas in the face of hunger and lust. Each time the boys are scolded for their actions, the American audiences introduced to an example of Asian morality, but it was simultaneously obvious that the most flawed characters in need of (European American moral) intervention were the ones are the ones played by Lui and Luke. The remainder of the roles played by East-Asian actors were those of the harsh Chinese government authorities or the looting masses. Furthermore, Wang's marital indiscretions are marked by symbolic allusions to Chinese ethnicity. Wang's attraction to Lotus is facilitated by her ornate Chinese garb, which similarly commands the lustful attraction of one of Wang's own sons.[58] The persistent influence of Yellow Peril stereotype was so thoroughly ingrained in 1930s American consciousness that encoded themes of Chinese sexual depravity and violence remained prominent.

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[55] Dong, *Hollywood Chinese.*
[56] Zia, *Asian American Dreams*, 113.
[57] Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens,* 22.
[58] Franklin, *The Good Earth*.

World War II and the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype

The birth of celebrity culture and media activism would both having a lasting impact on American culture, even if the earliest efforts by Asian film to counteract Yellow Peril stereotypes faded into obscurity. The anxieties of xenophobic modern American culture to global economic and cultural competition was recorded in some of Hollywood's first films of that period. As totalitarian regimes continued to stockpile power in Europe and Japan, American media too turned its attention to the international stage, and East-Asian stereotype evolved along the way to reflect the looming reality of a second World War.

The stereotype of the Perpetual Foreigner was a transformation of the Yellow Peril stereotype that appeared in the mid-20th century. Exaggerations of philosophical and cultural differences, thick accents and other allusions to a language barrier, and a nagging sense of "Otherness" are all symptomatic of this characterization. This intractable "Otherness" would be particularly bothersome to Americans of the mid-century who pictured Asian immigrants as "persons acknowledged as capable of acting like white Americans while remaining racially distinct from them."[59] Emboldened by World War II-era ideologies, the American public (including some Chinese American and Japanese American minorities) was convinced of the necessity of government intervention to facilitate racial liberalism, assimilation, and the cooperative boon of nationalistic pride through cultural uniformity. Economic cooperation between China and the American military also represented great potential economic gains after Chinese political upheavals were stabilized. Furthermore, the threat of the spread of Communism

[59] Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 4-5.

from Russia to China suggested to American leaders continuous Asiatic Exclusion was untenable.[60]

In film, nagging divisions between ethnic minorities and the European American majority were acted out through the arrangement of Oriental-themed objects as symbolic representations of East-Asian ethnicity. The American film industry utilized stylized sets, music, and wardrobe to evoke a sense of Asianness for viewers that the American film historian Homay King has termed the "Shanghai gesture." King's use of the "Shanghai gesture" allowed her to explore themes of the bizarre and primitive East-Asian stereotype in American film media without invoking Edward's Said's controversial Orientalist theories. The noir films of the 1940s were especially saturated sources of King's "Shanghai gesture." What was unique to King's approach was her analysis of atmospheric settings as a measure of this particular "load-bearing narrative element," which she argued imparted ideas of tension and paranoid discomfort, exoticism and desire, otherness, inscrutability, and dishonesty.[61] Examples include sets dominated with Oriental furniture, wall scrolls littered with unintelligible nonsense characters, incense, silk furnishing, and other objects that blended together notions of luxury and sin.[62]

King makes reference to *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *The Big Sleep* (1944), both starring Humphrey Bogart, as films which incorporate many of these elements into one picture. Through signifying objects and music the atmosphere is set and the central characters face off with mysterious forces decorated with sinister motifs of the "Shanghai gesture" and symbolic metaphors of the perpetual foreigner stereotype. The plot of *The Maltese Falcon* contained a series of double-crosses and mysterious dealings, in which Detective Sam Spade becomes

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[60] Wu, *The Color of* Success, 4-5.
[61] King, *Lost in Translation*, 49-51.
[62] *Ibid.*, 48.

embroiled while attempting to solve a homicide and to recover a lost valuable relic. The entire film takes place in California and contained no East-Asian characters. For this reason, the use of the "Shanghai gestures" in *The Maltese Falcon* can be reduced to communicating stereotypical notions of deceptive intent and perversion that carried over from the Yellow Peril stereotype of the early 20th century. The symbolic construction of a world of crime, just under the surface of an otherwise sunny urban California, is implicated through the invasion of these foreign objects. "Suspicion becomes entangled with the objects' place of origin," King explained, "In the film noir universe, [material objects] from across the Pacific are more dangerous, damning, and revelatory than a loaded gun."[63] The characterization of Joel Cairo (played by Peter Lorre) was heavily loaded with these 'orientalist' symbols. Stylized coins with squares cut from the center are pulled from Cairo's pockets after he is overpowered by Spade to the tune of ominous wind wood instruments. This find indicates to viewers that Cairo is not to be trusted, well before it is revealed that he works for the antagonist, Casper Gutsman. The coins suggest that Cairo had dealings in Asia that he had not disclosed with Spade. These insinuated transactions are not significant to the plot and never come up again as the film progresses, serving instead purely as a racialized atmosphere for the noir film. Spade's other client, Brigid O'Shaughnessy (played by Mary Astor) is also revealed to be in cooperation with the antagonists after Spade finds a tag in the brim of her hat that identifies it as originating in Hong Kong.

Another altogether different take on the perpetual foreigner stereotype is utilized to further emphasize the exoticism and Otherness of Joel Cairo. In the search of Cairo's pockets in a scene in which he has been knocked unconscious, Spade comes across a scented handkerchief to go along with the name cards scented with gardenia (which is native to Asia and the Pacific

[63] King, *Lost in Translation*, 52-53.

islands) that Cairo used to introduce himself. This object suggests that Cairo is a homosexual and comes with encoded moral judgments. Cairo is to be interpreted as perverse, which goes along with the slanted smirk on Cairo's face when he attempts to physically accost Spade at gunpoint under the pretense of searching him for a hidden weapon in a previous scene.[64] Filmmakers of the 1940s, according to King, typically intertwined "the stereotypes of the 'bent' homosexual and the 'slant-eyed' Asian."[65] Concerns about homosexuality and undesirable unassimilable minority populations were both holdovers from the pseudo-scientific eugenics movement, which had been used to justify the sterilization of racial and cultural minority populations to prevent the adulteration of the future 'American race' during the interwar period.[66] The blending of homosexual nuances with Asianness, redolent of Yellow Peril attitudes toward the bachelor societies of Chinatowns, and angular symbols also appears in *The Big Sleep*.

In *The Big Sleep*, a notebook of character ciphers in cramped angular handwriting is discovered by Philip Marlowe (again, played by Bogart) as he seeks out the identity of a murderer. The book belongs to the victim, Arthur Gwynn Greiger, a bookseller who holds a great deal of debt belonging to the daughter of Marlowe's client, Carmen Sternwood. The unanticipated murder of Greiger, who is found in his bedroom along with the notebook of ciphers, sets the stage for Marlowe to begin unraveling the mystery.

Marlow begins his investigation in Greiger's bedroom, which is crowded with oriental ornamentation, and described by Marlowe as perfumed and "womanish." The walls are decorated with Chinese calligraphy, an oriental rug takes up the majority of the floor space, and the air of the room is clouded with incense. Marlowe initially enters through a window, his travel

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[64] John Huston, *The Maltese Falcon* (Warner Bros., 1941).
[65] King, *Lost in Translation*, 57.
[66] Merryn Ekberg, "Second Opinions: The Old Eugenics and the New Genetics Compared," *Social History of Medicine* 20, no. 3 (2007): 581–590.

visualized for the viewer by a handheld camera, which is edited to include disorienting reverse shots. Marlowe explores the room, pawing through mysterious objects in a "miniature Chinatown, an oriental funhouse of riddles that, one by one, pop up to test Marlowe's interpretive skills."[67] Of these puzzles, a drugged Carmen Sternwood (played by Martha Vickers) dressed in a bastardized *qipao* (cheongsam) and seated in an ornately carved wooden chair, presents a particularly difficult challenge. She is unable to tell Marlowe what she witnessed, or why she is present at the scene. Marlow detects the potential significance of a Buddhist statue placed directly across from Sternwood. Within the statue is hidden a camera, but the film has already been removed.[68] Neither of these sources are able to answer any of Marlowe's questions. Both are externally clad in oriental finery, but each are equally empty and useless to the detective. The mise-en-scène is utilized in this case to communicate messages to Greiger, but it also connotes implications of the inscrutability and potential hollowness of

A semiotic analysis of the various setting elements in this shot from *The Big Sleep* (termed mise-en-scène in film studies) includes consideration of the writing of East-Asian style script in the background, the costume and suggestive posture of Sternwood in the middleground, and the body of Greiger in the foreground. Interpreted together these elements represented European American anxieties about East-Asian culture, civility, and morality in post-WWII American society.
Hawks, Howard. *The Big Sleep*. Warner Bros., 1946.

[67] King, *Lost in Translation*, 57.
[68] Howard Hawks, *The Big Sleep* (Warner Bros., 1946).

Eastern Buddhist philosophy. Both the empty statue and the "Shanghaied" Carmen grin and evasively avert their gaze; they are "made foreign"[69] to both Marlowe and the viewer who can see them only as decorated and ornate, but ultimately beyond the grasp of logical contact. Objects of mystery in the noir setting that make use of the perpetual foreigner stereotype would remain popular means to convey the anxiety that was a part of American consciousness in the post-war period. As American culture became increasingly xenophobic after decades of international war and paranoia over communism spread, allusions to racial differences became increasingly pervasive in mass media.

A blanket claim that American attitudes toward Asianness were limited to fear and distrust, however, would not accurately elucidate on the complex nature of the perpetual foreigner stereotype or its influence on race relations in the World War II period. Formal American allyship with China during World War II was proclaimed when Franklin Roosevelt included China in the newly formed United Nations in 1941/1942. Changes to American immigration policies in the following years relaxed some in the population restriction policies for Chinese refugees,[70] and they were largely received with approval by an American public keen to undermine the Japanese propaganda war machine.[71] In the immediate aftermath of the war, revaluations of the *Immigration Act of 1924* continued, resulting in the passage of the *War Brides Act* of 1945. The *War Brides Act* allowed for the entry of wives and children who themselves were not citizens as non-quota aliens so long as their spouse was a citizen and had served during the Second World War. The passage of this act mitigated some of the ethnocentric conflicts that had been in place since the 1920s, although it did still keep the racial quotas for East-Asian

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[69] King, *Lost in Translation*, 55-56.
[70] Lee and Christen T. Sasaki, eds., *Asian American History*, 149-151.
[71] George Stimpson, "Farley Thinks FDR on Skids," *Abilene Reporter-News*, December 17, 1943.

immigrants in place. Eventually, these would also be repealed in December of 1953 as a portion of the *McCarran-Walter Act*.[72] In terms of media activism and the production of East-Asian counter-narratives in film, East-Asian American and pan-cooperative East-Asian media were nearly altogether absent during the 1940s and 1950s in comparison to the periods before. However, the ongoing use of stereotype, even in more 'positive' media depictions of East-Asian Americans, would make this no more than a brief period of inactivity.

Media representations of the changing Chinese-American military relationship can be tracked through the popularity and problems associated with the fictional noir detective Charlie Chan. Chan was characterized as a Chinese immigrant living in Hawai'i, who solved mysteries with the help of his two Chinese American sons. He would become one of the most famous fictional characters in the world, and the sleuthing of Chan and his American-born children was featured in numerous post-war movies, radio programs, and television series. While often credited by media historians as the first significant positive East-Asian figure in popular American media, his characterization was no more free of the persistent foreigner stereotype than other East-Asian ethnic representations of the period. At once "uncomplaining and servile,"[73] Charlie Chan was also depicted as "intelligent yet effeminate." [74]

However, Chan's status as a Chinese noir icon of both the big and small screen, originally played by Japanese and Korean actors in the unpopular renditions in the 1920s, was precluded by a recasting of the character by European American actors (Warner Oland, Sydney Toiler, and Roland Winters) in yellowface. Oland's, Toiler's and Winters's Chan all spoke in a highly disjointed "fortune-cookie" English, often imparting words of wisdom that were intended

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[72] Lee and Christen T. Sasaki, eds., *Asian American History*, 149-155.
[73] Han, *The Cinematic Representation of the Chinese American Family*, 83.
[74] Ramasubramanian, "Television Exposure, Model Minority Portrayals, and Asian-American Stereotypes: An Exploratory Study," https://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr26/ramasubramanian.htm.

to be laced with mystery. [75] Chan's sleuthing and deciphering of evidence was at times comic and largely nonsensical, to which one of his sons would then be responsible for interpreting to Chan's bewildered European American clients. Audiences themselves became participants in the mystery, as they did their best to follow along with Chan's actions on screen, which were understood as bizarre not because of Chan's unique skills as a detective, but because of his foreignness.

The contrast between Chan and his sons, Lee Chan (played by Keye Luke) and Jimmy Chan (played by Sen Yung), did more to combat East-Asian American stereotypes than depictions of the series' title star ever did. Both Luke and Yung were some of the only Chinese actors of the 1940s who had the opportunity to play the roles of central Chinese characters. Like Chan, they were depicted as intelligent, if not somewhat obnoxious and meddlesome, but unlike Chan, the characters were both portrayed as natural born American citizens. Depictions of Lee and Jimmy Chan implied that both boys were imbued with the same mental astuteness as their father, along with the robust physical prowess prized in post-war American culture. For example, Chan's eldest son was depicted as a member of the United States Olympic team, as a student of a prominent American university, as bilingual (speaking both English and Mandarin on screen), and capable of holding his own in physical confrontations with the villainous characters of the series. The Chan boys, more than Charlie Chan himself, were capable of "standing in both worlds,"[76] and their inclusion to the other productions of the 1940s served as genuine examples of early positive East-Asian American icons in American media history.

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[75] Dong, *Hollywood Chinese*.
[76] *Ibid*.

Opportunities for Chinese American film stars like Keye Luke in major American public media remained relatively rare. Other East-Asian ethnic minorities, like the Korean actor Phillip Ahn and Filipino actress Fely Franquelli, assisted in developing a greater degree of East-Asian ethnic diversity in Hollywood, though chances for East-Asian actors to represent their own ethnic identities were extremely limited. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor and the forced internment of over 100,000 Japanese Americans in February 1942, anti-Japanese war propaganda films were produced in great numbers. Calls for East-Asian American actors in Hollywood were made either for the roles of Chinese peasants as victims or of Japanese military men, neither of which encouraged any kind of progressive East-Asian identity construction on-screen or pan-ethnic East-Asian cooperation off-screen.

East-Asian American actors played Japanese characters in films such as *Across the Pacific* (1942), starring Humphrey Bogart as Captain Rick Leland and Sydney Greenstreet as Dr. Lorenz. While Bogart's Leland is unscrupulous at best, offering his services as a military agent to the highest bidder, his actions serve to contrast with that of the Japanophile, Lorenz. Lorenz has concocted a plot to destroy the locks of the Panama Canal with a seemingly amiable Japanese America named Joe Totsuiko (played by Chinese American actor Victor Sen Yung). In a rare inclusion of a South Asian character in a major Hollywood production, a Filipino assassin (played by Rudy Roles) is thwarted as he attempts to eliminate Lorenz. While this is quickly explained away as a misunderstanding in the plot of the film, the presence of Roles's character represented the very real unreciprocated relationship between the Japanese military, which defended its policy of military expansionism as a pan-Asian protector of greater South Asia, and the majority of other sovereign East-Asian territories.

Offscreen, the lack of solidarity between Japanese Americans and other East-Asian ethnic minorities was similarly palpable in the 1940s. Preemptive defenses against racial stereotyping and aggression towards those mistaken as ethnically Japanese incited the production and distribution of pins that proclaimed, "I am Chinese." Such an instance was recorded in the December 1941 issue of *Life* magazine, which included a photograph of a Chinese American journalist sporting a pin that labeled her as a "Chinese Reporter: *Not Japanese*, Please!" This image was included in the article, "How to Tell Japs from the Chinese," alongside other photographs of Japanese and Chinese faces with descriptions to delineate each by differences in complexion.[77]

Chinese Americans used pins to label their ethnicity to protect themselves from being sent to Japanese internment camps or from ethnic abuse.
Los Angeles Times. *Lapel Buttons for Chinese Americans*. December 22, 1941. Photograph, 10 x 12.5 cm. University of California Digital Library. http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb1g5003tx/?layout=metadata.

Post-World War II Reconstruction and the Exotic Conquest Stereotype

The end of World War II was celebrated worldwide after the surrender of the Japanese Imperial government on August 15, 1945. The war had lasted less than a decade, but it had been set in motion by misguided western scientific experimentation as early as the 1930s by the

[77] Feng, *Identities in Motion*, 68-69. Feng cites the year of *Across the Pacific*'s release as 1941 in his book, but this appears to have been in error.

American eugenics movement, and the Eurocentric goal to obtain a national racial and cultural unity, which was later adopted by Adolf Hitler to justify horrific acts if imprisonment and genocide. East-Asian Americans suffered their own sets of human rights abuses after the attack on Pearl Harbor was used to condone the internment of Japanese American citizens. Communist anxieties, among others, encouraged cooperation between the American and Chinese military. This political alliance encouraged the relaxation East-Asian immigration control and inspired popular media depictions of a more positive East-Asian ethnicity, and conversely discouraged pan-ethnic East-Asian cinematic momentum. However, East-Asian American actors and filmmakers still continued to find themselves misrepresented, underemployed, and subject to a revolving door of societal acceptance in American popular media. The increasing alienation and ongoing perpetuation of humiliating stereotypes would leave East-Asian communities with few allies to rely on besides one another.

The ambivalent attitudes American filmmakers held for the Chinese during World War II would not last into the next decade, and Chinese Americans would find themselves suffering under Yellow Peril renditions once again. In October of 1949, Mao Zedong formally announced the founding of the People's Republic of China after Communist forces forced the U.S. backed National government to retreat from the national capital of Beijing. Communist paranoia in America would result in a restructuring of Hollywood that the historian John Dower called "The Red Purge," in which thousands of intellectuals, journalists, actors, and filmmakers were banned from participating in American media.[78] In addition, increasing prosperity heralded in a political shift to the right. The rhetoric of conservative leaders inflamed ethnocentric attitudes towards

[78] Alan Nadel, *Demographic Angst: Cultural Narratives and American Films of the 1950s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 145.

immigrants and minorities.[79] While the suspicion of secret Communist sympathizers in America began gathering steam in 1947, attention was increasingly drawn to East-Asian Americans and East-Asian immigrants after the successful Communist takeover of China and American combat against China in Korea began in 1950.

Fears of Communist subversives in Hollywood were of particular concern due to the perceived power that entertainment media had to dispense ideologies to the masses. Any actors, directors, playwrights, or producers suspected of ties to the Communist Party, or those who refused to supply information about others suspected to have ties to Communism, were blacklisted from positions in the entertainment industry. For East-Asian actors, this pushed many of them to take part in work behind the camera where their contributions were less visible, as boom riggers, cameramen, and other technical professions in the field.[80] European American filmmakers rushed to produce movies that promoted heroic American defense against encroaching Communist Chinese and Communist Korean forces in the Pacific. In an about-face from World War II, less than a decade before, Japanese and American troops would be allied in the conflict.

Thus, the American film industry needed to pivot away from its characterization of the Japanese as alien, merciless, and as the perpetual Other. Of all the films that were released in the late 1940s and early 1950s, *The Steel Helmet* (1951) was the most direct in its confrontation with American racism. The film featured a handful of characters of color and utilized their stories to promote interracial cooperation. The film focused on an American army unit captured and taken as prisoners of war in North Korea. The unit is executed in a firing line, but the film's central

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[79] Peter Lev, *History of the American Cinema: Transforming the Screen 1950-1959*, ed. Charles Harpole, vol. 7 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003), 33-34.
[80] Dong, *Hollywood Chinese*.

character, Sergeant Zack, survives the execution when the bullet fails to penetrate his helmet. After faking his death, the Sergeant crawls past his deceased comrades, hands still bound, in pursuit of an abandoned army knife to free himself.

However, his actions do not go unnoticed, and the film's soundtrack rises to a crescendo to highlight the drama of a gunman returning to finish Zack off. The gunman reaches the knife first, and Zach again plays dead while the camera pans up to the gunman's eyes to emphasize his ethnicity. However, rather than being killed as the epic build-up of music suggests, the climax is abruptly cut short when Zack's bindings are cut by the gunman. The gunman is revealed as a South Korean orphan affectionately called "Short Round" (played by William Chun), who offers to guide Sergeant Zack out of the enemy territory. As they travel, Short Round confronts Zack's racial epithets, taking pride in his identity as a South Korean.[81]

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Concerns about communist propaganda reaching the general public grew with the affordability of the television set. Anonymous. *"Don't Patronize the Reds!" Advertisement*. c. -1956 1960. Print. Jewish Women's Archive. https://jwa.org/media/dont-patronize-reds.

[81] Samuel Fuller, *The Steel Helmet* (Lippert Pictures, 1951).

Before long, Short Round is able to assist Sergeant Zack in reuniting with another U.S. infantry troop at a Buddhist temple. Among them is another Asian character, Sergeant Tanaka (played by Richard Loo), Tanaka's character stands apart from many previous depictions of ethnically East-Asian characters because he is portrayed as having earned the same military honors as the European American central character. Unfortunately, the group is infiltrated by a North Korean Major (played by Harold Fong), who intends to undermine the unit's comradery by teasing the ethnic minorities among them about the rampant racism in mid-century America. "We have the same eyes," the Major insists to Tanaka, "They hate us because of our eyes." To this, Tanaka feigns ignorance, initially pretending not to hear him. As the North Korean Major continues to push, Tanaka snaps, accusing the Communists of slipping as "con" men. The Major reminds Tanaka of the American history of Japanese internment and the cruel names his character was called before he left the home front, including that of a "Dirty Jap." From this comes Tanaka's most significant line in the film: "I'm not a dirty Jap rat," he says, "I'm an American."[82]

The Steel Helmet was one of the only films of this period to emphasize an American identity for an individual of Asian descent. However, it is important to note is some of the other stereotypes *The Steel Helmet* continued to perpetuate, especially it intentionally or unintentionally discourage pan-ethnic East-Asian cooperative identity politics. While Japanese Americans may have been given dignity and opportunities to identify as American through Sergeant Tanaka's dialogue[83], the label of foreignness was redirected toward those of Chinese and Korean descent. In the pivotal exchange of words between Sergeant Tanaka and the North

[82] Fuller, *The Steel Helmet*.
[83] Jeff Adachi, *The Slanted Screen: Asian Men in Film and Television*, AAMM Productions, 2006.

Korean Major, Tanaka threatens to knock out the "rabbit teeth" of his opponent, recycling the familiar Yellow Peril image of Asian caricature. Perpetual Foreigner stereotypes were also used in real-world intraracial cross-ethnic conflicts over control of trade in the California Delta between Japanese American and Filipino communities in the post-war period. European American journalists gleefully reported disputes between the two parties, both of which accused the other of being less 'American,' either because of the historical behavior of ethnic Japanese during WWII or the ongoing Filipino efforts to achieve independence from American sovereignty.[84] East-Asian American politics in the post-war period encouraged internalized racism and undermined the development of an organized pan-ethnic East-Asian minority.

The Steel Helmet's director, Samuel Fuller, used camera framing techniques to cinematically emphasize ethnic divisions in the climactic exchange between Tanaka and the North Korean war prisoner. As the dialog progresses, the camera pans closer and closer to the Major's face, who watches Sergeant's Tanaka's reactions out of the corner of his eye. In comparison, Tanaka keeps his gaze straightforward. The view of the camera becomes increasingly constricted to the Major's conniving gaze, edited to contrast with Sergeant Tanaka's full face. Fuller's cinematography humanizes the Japanese Sergeant and simultaneously distorts the Korean

Richard Loo as Sargent Tanaka from *The Steel Helmet*. Lippert Pictures, 1951.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with a mobile device or visit http://bit.ly/SteelHelmet.

[84] Azuma, Eiichiro. "Racial Struggle, Immigrant Nationalism, and Ethnic Identity: Japanese and Filipinos in the California Delta." Pacific Historical Review 67, no. 2 (May 1998): 184-186.

Major.[85] This scene serves to contradict the Major's previous claims that the two share "the same eyes," and to allude to real-life barriers to pan-ethnic Asian cooperation in post-WWII American culture.

Where intraracial Asian American cooperation was minimized, blatant racism in public media between European Americans and the Japanese seemingly disappeared overnight. *The Steel Helmet,* among other works, was representative of peace efforts between the two nations, both of which agreed that violent excesses during the war were the result of intense propaganda and atmospheres of racial superiority. The U.S. occupation and reconstruction of Japan (both of which resulted in policies that strongly favored American economic interests) demanded the elimination of stereotypical renditions of Japanese racism in American media.[86] The American public, however, was less willing to reverse their racial prejudices, and Japanese Americans returning home from the internment camps found little opportunities for employment or sympathy. A cross-racial atmosphere of fear and contempt meant that racial harmony in the post-war period existed only on the surface.[87] In terms of American mass media, the 'disappearance' of anti-Japanese racist imagery could more accurately be described as an evolution of the perpetual foreigner stereotype from the unknowable to the misunderstood.

"The Birth of a New Japan," published in September of 1951 in *Life* magazine, attempted to define the Japanese people in this way. The article contended that, much in opposition to the popular portrayals of the Japanese over the previous decade, the Japanese were incapable of determining the difference between right and wrong. With proper American (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant) guidance, these people could be parented to be civil participants in international

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[85] Fuller, *The Steel Helmet*.
[86] Yukiko Koshiro, *Trans-Pacific Racisms and the U.S. Occupation of Japan*, Studies of the East Asian Institute, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999): 1-2.
[87] Koshiro, *Trans-Pacific Racisms and the U.S. Occupation of Japan*, 42.

cooperation and were especially successful when they distanced themselves from their flawed traditional culture. The author argued that Japanese traditionalism bound the Japanese so tightly into social constraints that they were forced to remain "appallingly polite" until the people melted down into aggressive tantrums.[88] Thus, assimilation was argued as the obvious solution and the only way to rescue the Japanese from themselves.

While far from a depiction of valuable contributors to American interests, the shifting representations of ethnically Japanese characters displayed some of the earliest hallmarks of the Model Minority stereotype. Films and media began producing tales of the new childlike Asian, emotionally and socially retarded. Marlon Brando, staring as the character Sakini (in yellowface) in *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956), perpetuated this portrayal to American audiences. Brando's Sakini was buffoonish, indolent, troublesome, and incapable of comprehending simple orders or from keeping his socks from falling down. Sakini's role was particularly damaging because he operated as the language interpreter between the residents of Tobiki village, many of which were played by Japanese American actors, and the American occupiers. Thus Brando served as the vessel through which all the Japanese characters in the film were forced to communicate. As such, the stereotypical characterization of Sakini reduced an entire cast of Japanese ethnicity to this same childlike model.

The stereotype of the child-like Japanese ethnicity served the dual purpose of minimizing Japanese accountability and justifying American intervention into the construction of the Japanese government and fiscal structure in a manner that recalled Rudyard Kipling's *The White Man's Burden.* The plot of *Teahouse of the August Moon* depicted the intentions of the American occupation as much more valuable, if not noble, than the Japanese's intentions for their own

[88] Nadel, *Demographic Angst,* 145-147.

community. In an effort to democratize and rebuild Tobiki village, the American army is instructed to build a schoolhouse, but the locals construct a teahouse for leisure and the consumption of peach brandy instead. While not as democratic as a school, the American occupiers are swayed when they can see the capitalist value of the teahouse (as an antithetical homage to spreading Communism in East Asia). The leisurely nature of the teahouse also serves to "ally anxieties over the possibility that a democratic Japan will be an industrial rival to the United States," explains the American culture historian Alan Nadel, in his reading of the film.[89] Colonel Purdy, the character responsible for the reconstruction of the Tobiki village region, also makes use of the local women's skills as geisha performers. The service offered by the Japanese geisha at the teahouse provides both entertainment and personal attention to the American army visitors to increase the revenue of the venture.

In fact, American GIs make up the majority of the clientele in *The Teahouse of the Autumn Moon*, while the male Japanese characters only appear to communicate to the American visitors on skills the native women possess through a series of non-verbal nods and winks. The sexualization of Asian women would become an increasingly popular motif for American cinema in the 1950s. These Exotic Conquest characters would typically appear in two forms: some more aggressive sexual figures, such as Machiko Kyō in *The Teahouse of the Autumn Moon*, were cast in roles of geishas or other professions that bordered very closely with prostitution. Others were more naïve and childlike, like Sakini, but their virginity and sexual potential were often the most significant parts of their characterization. American cinema that includes stereotyped Exotic Conquest characters largely depicted ethnically Asian males as asexual, lacking demonstrative interests in sex or heterosexual sex in particular, while the sexual

[89] Nadel, *Demographic Angst*, 152.

qualities of female characters were exaggerated, presented as ripened and ready for the consumption of a European American audience. Further complicating the stereotype was the fact that the ethnicity of these characters is emphasized as part of their erotic appeal,[90] serving to perpetual the concept of Pervasive Foreignness.

Public and political debates about admitting Hawai'i as the 50th state in the late 1950s presented American filmmakers with the fertile new ground to depict romanticized tales of conquest, exoticism, and white male American superiority. Proponents to the reception of the new territory argued for the potential income revenue of this tropical paradise, while opponents emphasized the racial

Marlon Brando's rendition of Sakini in *The Teahouse of the August Moon* served as a coquettish liaison for the sexual exploits of European American men and Japanese women during post-WWII Japanese reconstruction. European American filmmakers employed stereotypes of the naïve and childlike East-Asian male to undermine historical narratives of a dangerous and conniving Imperial Japanese military. The prolific use of this symbolic characterization alongside the exotic conquest stereotype primed European American audiences to restructure their attitudes of American-Japanese political and economic cooperation.
Mann, Daniel. *The Teahouse of the August Moon*. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1966.

[90] Bhoomi K. Thakore, *South Asians on the U.S. Screen: Just Like Everyone Else?* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 71-74.

features of the native descendants of South Asian Pacific explorers.[91] For the film industry, the women of the Pacific were a potent resource to attract theatergoers with a growing appetite for exotic women. The 1958 film, *She Gods of Shark Reef*, filmed in Kaua'i and released months before the admission of Hawai'i into American statehood, was one of the films to satisfy this new demand.

The film's plot featured the story of two shipwrecked men who stumbled their way onto an island populated only by women. These women worship the violent nature of the shark, who serves as their guardian and was indicative to the audience of the naïve traditionalism of the natives. Chris Johnston (played by Bill Cord) and his brother relax in this paradise, served by the women, and told at many points that their money has no value on the island. Instead, the women seek only the "company" of the men as repayment.[92] For their part, the native women of the island spend their days happily swimming and collecting pearls for the Big Company, which they surrender to be sold without complaint. The pearl hunting pastime represented the virginity of the women, "defended by a stubborn shell until the time when it is pried open and the flesh voraciously consumed," as alliterated by Jane Caputi and Lauri Sagle in "Femme Noire: Dangerous Women of Color in Popular Film and Television."[93] Encoded messages of both economic and sexual gains, seemingly effortless for Chris Johnston and his brother, were then communicated to American viewing audiences.

In the opening credits of *She Gods of Shark Reek*, the filmmakers thank the people of Kaua'i for the opportunity to film on site, which suggested to the viewer that what they saw in the film was a representation the atmosphere and cultural reality of the islands of Hawai'i. The

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[91] Jane Caputi and Lauri Sagle, "Femme Noire: Dangerous Women of Color in Popular Film and Television," *Jean Ait Belkhir, Race, Gender & Class Journal*, Race, Gender, Class in Media, 11, no. 2 (2004): 96.
[92] Roger Corman, *She Gods of Shark Reef* (American International Picture, 1956).
[93] Caputi and Lauri Sagle, "Femme Noire: Dangerous Women of Color in Popular Film and Television," 96.

picture also promoted other significant distortions of ethnic contact, most notably between European American men and East-Asian women, through the Exotic Conquest stereotype. For example, the women of the fictional unnamed paradise are largely mute. With the exception of coquettish giggles, the women are dependent upon the village matriarch to represent their emotions and concerns. The Russian actress Jeanne Gerson plays the matriarch, Pua, and she communicates with both the central characters and audience through short phrases delivered in pidgin English, which American viewership was already culturally trained to disregard as either deceitful or foolish through the legacy of the perpetual foreigner stereotype. Much like Sakini in *Teahouse of the August Moon*, the women of Shark Reef are woefully two-dimensional and were unrepresentative of the historical reality of Hawa'i's large English-speaking populations that had been interacting with English speakers since the 18th century. Instead, the women communicate simplified stories through dance (of which the European American central characters are the primary subjects), serving as a source of visual entertainment and consumption for their visitors.[94] And while some of the

Lisa Montell as Mahia and Bill Cord as Chris Johnston in *She Gods of Shark Reef*. American International Pictures, 1958.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or go to http://bit.ly/SheGodsofSharkReef.

[94] Corman, *She Gods of Shark Reef*.

background women of the film had varying degrees of skin complexion, the romantic lead, Mahia, was played by the Polish actress Lisa Montell rather than an ethnic Pacific Islander.[95]

Eventually, Pua comes to see the central characters as a threat and attempts to distance Mahia and Johnston from one another. In a scene in which Johnston accidentally tears a *lei* necklace, Pua's fearful reaction implies her sense of conviction, a performance the majority of American audiences would interpret as irrational and superstitious. Johnston is goaded into pursuing Mahia by his brother, who teases Johnston that he has never committed a "taboo" in his life (suggesting an insult to his sexual virility) that could only be disproven through claiming Mahia.[96] Meanwhile, in a fit of hysterical, cult-like worship to the shark gods, Pua decides to sacrifice Mahia to the sharks as punishment for her attraction to Johnston. In a scene of ethical and implied racial superiority, Johnston rescues Mahia after she is dumped into the sea with her hands bound by (and dressed in a bikini made from) tropical flowers. "[Johnston] represents a colonizing paradigm," Caputi and Sagle explained, "whereby the colonizers assimilate the Natives, convince the Natives of colonial integrity, moral superiority, and chivalry while desanctifying Native gods, ridiculing Native culture, and undermining Native social relationships."[97] In the final scenes, Johnston and Mahia sail away arm-in-arm while Pua pleads for her return on the shore, confirming for the viewer that all excursions into the exotic are only meant to be temporary, but that they may come with sexual souvenirs.

The proliferation of the Exotic Conquest stereotype manifested in many films of the mid-to-late 1950s. While filmic depictions of sexual, rather than romantic, interracial relations were more common, the proliferation of the Exotic Conquest stereotype in popular American media

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[95] Caputi and Lauri Sagle, "Femme Noire: Dangerous Women of Color in Popular Film and Television," 96.
[96] Corman, *She Gods of Shark Reef*.
[97] Caputi and Lauri Sagle, "Femme Noire: Dangerous Women of Color in Popular Film and Television," 97.

coincided with changing American cultural attitudes toward interracial marriage. As early as 1948 (*Perez v. Lippold*), individual American states began overturning laws opposing miscegenation. However, the emphasis on sexual liaisons over the construction of multiethnic families was reflective in social taboos and segregation legislation that continued to deny access to mixed-race children into white spaces, even in the custody of their European American parents.[98] This was similarly reflected in American public media, where interracial heterosexual contact never seemed to result in progeny. Without depictions of the fiscal or emotional consequences of parenthood, male European American audiences were free to imagine sexual contact East-Asian ethnicities as a conquest of pleasure and power.

In 1950s popular media. Japanese geishas were a popular source of this type of entertainment archetype, such as the characterization of Okichi as a cultural liaison and romantic partner in *The Barbarian and the Geisha* (1958). The primary purpose of Okichi's role is to objectively substitute as John Wayne's vacation paradise "hotspot" in an otherwise unwelcoming Shimoda prefecture. Other examples emerged in *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* (1955), in which the romance between an American reporter and a Eurasian doctor (played by Jennifer Jones) was tempered by the misgivings of her Chinese society, and *House of Bamboo* (1955), a film noir picture in which the Japanese native Shirley Yamaguchi (played by Mariko) posed as a personal "kimono girl" for an undercover American detective. In these cases, Asian female characters were the prize for American audience members to consume, but in some cases, male or figurative male characters of Asian descent were also out on display as examples of exotic eroticism.

[98] Koshiro, Trans-Pacific Racisms and the U.S. Occupation of Japan, 159-160.

In the same way that women of Asian descent were eroticized, displays of homosexual suggestion were occasionally utilized to signify an exchange of power structure in American cinema. Nadel referred to this as a "transgressive" exception in his study of the 1957 film, *Sayonara*, starring Marlon Brando.[99] Early in the film, Brando's character, Major Gruver, exchanges pictures with a fellow in his unit of the women they intended to marry. Major Gruver exaggerates the moral qualities of his fiancé while sharing a photo of her clad in swim attire. At many points during this introductory scene, Gruver references his fiancé's status as an American citizen. However, Gruver resorts to racial epithets when his fellow serviceman offers up a photo of his more modestly dressed Japanese bride-to-be.[100] However, Gruver is not passionately disposed to the sexual opportunities provided by his later fiancé's arrival at the Japanese outpost, enamored instead by a Japanese theater performer, Hana-ogi (played by the Japanese American actress Miiko Taka). Hana-ogi plays the part of both male and female characters in her theater company, and it is upon witnessing Hana-ogi in one of these male roles that Gruver becomes infatuated by her.

The androgyny of Hana-ogi's character pointedly toyed with the American homophobic paranoia of the 1950s[101]; through homoerotic allusions *Sayonara* was able to delve into sexually ambiguous waters and the erotic possibilities within, couched in the safety of imagining homosexual desire as a symptom of exotic mysticism. For example, in the screenwriting process for *From Here to Eternity* (1953), the experiences between American infantrymen and

[99] Nadel, *Demographic Angst*, 155.
[100] Joshua Logan, *Sayonara* (Warner Bros., 1957).
[101] Nadel, *Demographic Angst*, 155-156.

homosexual men in Hawai'i was stripped from the story before it made it to the screen, as far too scandalous of a subject to be imagined so close to United States borders.[102]

While *Sayonara* did not contain any explicitly queer characters, the (lack of) masculinity on the part of the picture's central male Japanese characters was an important example of both the gendered nature of the Exotic Conquest stereotype and the desexualization of Asian male subjects that were inherent to its use by the American film industry. In the film, Gruver's ignored American fiancé goes in search of solace once she came to Japan. Ironically, she too seems to develop a growing attraction to a male Japanese performer, Nakamura, who reprises both male and female roles in a single-sex theater company like Hana-ogi. However, suggestions of a relationship between an Asian man, even one that was dressed as a woman, and a European American woman was too risqué for American audiences, so the role was given to the Mexican actor Ricardo Montalbán. Nadel, who inaccurately refers to Montalbán as a European American man, was still correct in his assertion that this casting choice protected imagined gender barriers and the virtuosity of a European American woman's on-screen persona.[103]

Sexual and romantic relationships would still figure into American cinema representations of women of ethnic descent in films of the 1960s, while male characters would be represented as increasingly backward, socially isolated, well-mannered, and asexual. These factors would grow to become the fatal flaws that would make the intellectual superiority imagined of Asians and Asian Americans through the Model Minority stereotype more palatable for American audiences. While the term "model minority" would not be officially coined until 1966, cinematic representations of the stereotype emerged sooner. Portrayals of the subservient

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[102] Lev, *History of the American Cinema*, 46-47.
[103] Nadel, *Demographic Angst*, 156.

and modest East-Asian character, increasingly featured in American television and magazine advertisements as waiters and housekeepers, served to indicate the constant domination of Asian descendants and Asian Americans in post-war America.[104] Simultaneously, a burgeoning Yellow Power and Civil Rights Movement was coming to meet these stereotypical representations of ethnically Asian peoples, gaining strength through a shared pan-ethnic East-Asian American identity.

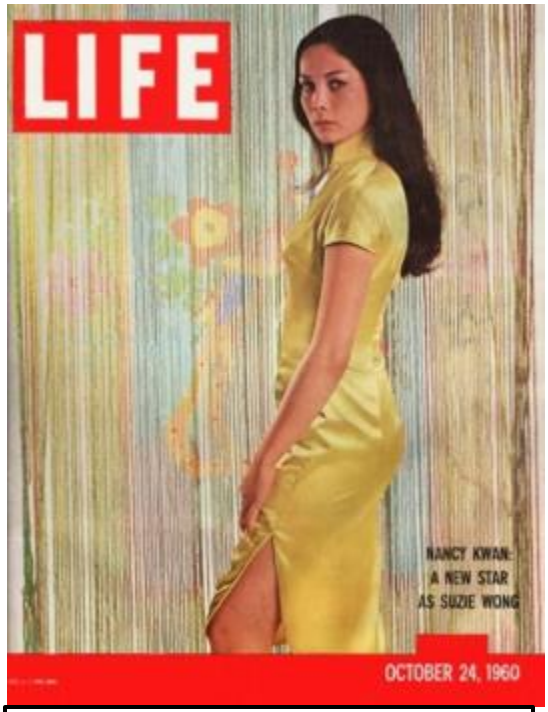
Before the protests and politicization of East-Asian American identity would emerge in the mid-1960s, a handful of early 60s American films featuring Asian American leads rocked popular American consciousness. Nancy Kwan, who would eventually become an outspoken voice for Asian heritage representation and casting in Hollywood, starred in the 1960 film, *The World of Suzie Wong*. Kwan would be one of the first biracial movie stars in Hollywood. Though the characterization of mixed race roles had figured in previous American cinematic history, these roles were typically given to European American actors. As the title character of *The World of Suzie Wong*, Kwan played a witty prostitute whose intelligence is mitigated for the audience by moralistic assumptions about her profession and performance as a victim. The film was an immense success, but the growing collective of the East-Asian American community balked at her rise to fame as a beauty standard because her Caucasian ethnic heritage was suspected for the sudden palatability of Asian beauty by American theatergoers.[105] Other members of the community pointed to the typical motifs of the Exotic Conquest stereotype in the characterization of Suzie Wong, cited either as her profession in sexual service or her

[104] Ramasubramanian, "Television Exposure, Model Minority Portrayals, and Asian-American Stereotypes: An Exploratory Study," https://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr26/ramasubramanian.htm.
[105] Dong, *Hollywood Chinese*.

relationship with a European American love interest, as reasons that the success of the film did not indicate an achievement for East-Asian American representation.[106]

Changing Immigration Policies and the Model Minority Stereotype

In the decades after WWII, depictions of East-Asian Americans and East-Asian immigrants evolved drastically from the Yellow Peril and Perpetual Foreigner stereotypes that came before. Rather than supplanting these formulaic racial archetypes, the Exotic Conquest stereotype that emerged in the 1950s contained elements of both. Its manifestation was the result well-intended, but unsuccessful, efforts to eliminate attitudes of racial superiority as the United States and Japan collaborated to reconstruct the island nation as America's democratic progeny. Concurrently, the American government moved to restrict the spread of Communism both at home and abroad, via the Hollywood Blacklist and participation in the Korean War against Communist China. For East-Asian Americans, America's rise to prominence as a world superpower coincided with popular media renditions European American male sexual domination over East-Asian women and the distortion of East-Asian masculinity. Pan-ethnic



The casting of biracial actress Nancy Kwan as the star of *The World of Suzie Wong* marked a significant shift in East-Asian American popular media representation. However, her casting also alienated East-Asian communities her criticized the Suzie Wong character for promoting elements of the exotic conquest stereotype.
Life, October 24, 1960.

[106] Shilpa Davé, LeiLani Nishime, and Tasha G. Oren, eds., *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 154.

East-Asian cooperation remained an obscure notion, but this would soon change as the civil rights movement gained momentum in the 1960s.

The early years of 1960 appeared initially promising for East-Asian ethnic representation. In 1961, *Flower Drum Song* made history as the first American film featuring a largely all East-Asian cast. Already well received as a book, written by C.Y. Lee while he was studying abroad in the United States, and a musical, the film release in 1961 was a resounding success. The film distinguished between the lived experiences of East-Asian immigrants and their children born in the United States, though the film predated any opportunities for the characters to self-identify as Asian Americans. What, instead, was academically significant about *Flower Drum Song*'s reimagining how it encouraged white America to envision ethnically East-Asians as "model minorities."

The film version took certain liberties from Lee's novelization to create the contextually appropriate stereotypical rendition. The central characters, Mei Li and her father, were depicted as refugees from the Communist strongholds in North China. The Li family were forced to illegally immigrate into the United States, victims of the circumstances they fled, rather than the original version in which they enter legally. In the film version, the father was scripted as an intellectual, seeking out opportunities to teach, rather than his previous profession as a restaurant owner. Highlighting the family's educational qualities and humanizing the circumstances that forced them to flee China could easily be interpreted as positive depictions of ethnically East-Asian immigrants, but the film was still highly flawed and stereotypically encoded.

As a stereotype, a Model Minority caricature refers to a non-European immigrant or ethnic minority that is already trained in a valuable skill set believed to be profitable to American interests. In comparison to 'problem minorities,' these individuals are expected to make stable,

law-abiding citizens. The emphasis of contrast between "model minorities" and "problem minorities" created tension between East-Asian minorities and others, especially black, Latinx, and South Asian minorities.[107] The level of success in society (in terms of occupation, education, and marital stability) of a Model Minority was attributed to that individual's race, rather than his/her character, and the degree of that success was measured by how assimilated into European American culture he/she/they was.[108] Roger's and Hammerstein's vision for *Flower Drum Song* was altered from the original in ways that specifically emphasized this Model Minority stereotype.[109]

The song, "Grant Avenue," revealed one of these troubling examples, in which Mei Li's romantic rival, Linda Low (played by Nancy Kwan), praised the manners and docility of the Chinese immigrant. At once blending elements of the Progressive Foreigner, Exotic Conquest, and Model Minority stereotypes, Low croons to the viewer that sale items on Grant Avenue include, "Shark-fin soup, bean cake fish./ The girl who serves you all your food/ Is another tasty dish!"[110] The film also heavily extolled assimilation in the song "Chop Suey." The metaphor of the title dish suggests that America is made up of many different people who blend into a cohesive dish and that Chinese immigrants were capable of merging naturally into that mix, despite its contested ethnic origin.[111] Cultural erasure and the depictions of the Chinese as a race of polite intellectuals, both malleable to Americanization and well-suited to contributing to the nation's overall wealth, mitigated *Flower Drum Song*'s impact for ethnic representation.

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[107] Rosalind S. Chou and Joe R. Feagin, *The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism*, 2nd ed., (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2015): 20.
[108] *Ibid.*, 2.
[109] Madeline Y. Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 167-168.
[110] Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, *Flower Drum Song*, Universal Pictures, 1961.
[111] Dong, *Hollywood Chinese*.

One thing *Flower Drum Song* did get correct was the attention it devoted to the steadily increasing numbers of East-Asian immigration. Barriers at the border had been relaxed at many different points since the *Immigration Act of 1924,* reflective of changing American cultural concerns and military allyship that especially favored East-Asian minorities. Incoming immigrants found the actual American environment far less hospitable than popular media would have suggested, aggravated by persistent elements of more damaging Yellow Peril and Perpetual Foreigner stereotypes embedded within the more 'progressive' renditions of the 1950s and 1960s. Chinese immigrants, for example, were still denied citizenship opportunities due to the surviving Chinese Exclusion Act. Immigration quotas also remained stringently for Japanese and Filipino migrants, despite expansions, in the 1940s. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 finally abolished identifying factors of race that had previously stymied an applicant's chance for citizenship, but the demands of racial minority ratios set in place by the National Origins Quota System remained, which allowed for no more than 1/6th of 1 percent of the population from each Asian nationality access at a time. It was the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act that finally eliminated the Quota System and allowed for significant increases in the numbers of Asian immigrants to the United States.[112]

Simultaneously, the Civil Rights Movement proved attractive to immigrants and natural born Americans of East-Asian descent. While immigrant populations and varying members of the Chinese American, Japanese American, and other members of the East-Asian American population would not come to recognize themselves as a pan-ethnic Asian American group until the end of the 1960s, cooperation would lead to confrontation with stereotypical representations.

[112] Ishizuka, *Serve the People*, 20-21.

Popular media reflected some of the more active participation in social movements by divergent members of the Asian American community.

The use of yellowface largely came to an end in the 1960s, especially after the public criticism from ethnic minorities of Michael Rooney's rendition of Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961). Additionally, George Takei's performance on the science-fiction television series *Star Trek* confronted the stereotypes of the Perpetual Foreigner by delivering his lines free of an overbearing accent.[113] The roles of American popular media in the production of stereotypes and racial representation would continue to be heavily debated after the 1960s. As advertising became increasingly pervasive and competition between feature films and television programming splintered American focus, the 1960s brought to a close an "evolutionary continuum" of pervasive East-Asian in American film.[114] Films like *The Mountain Road* (1960), featuring Lisa Lu as an American educated widow of a Chinese war causality who communicates confidently in English with a clumsy American army translator, represented East-Asian American women with poise and class. Furthermore, for a film set in World War II about Chinese and American collaboration against the Japanese Imperial Army, *The Mountain Road* contained no scenes of the Japanese acting like enemy combatants and thus the film resisted the tradition of demonizing one ethnic East-Asian group over another.[115]

EAST-ASIAN AMERICAN FILMMAKING IN THE 1960S

The affluence granted to the average U.S. family after World War II prompted major shifts in American culture; booming incomes and growth, paired with massive population influx of young adults disaffected by Communist paranoia and war culture inspired the anti-

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[113] *Asian American Perspectives on Mickey Rooney's Yellow Face Portrayal on "Breakfast at Tiffany's"* (Youtube, 2015), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZAafI9w7CY8.
[114] Lev, *History of the American Cinema*, 302.
[115] Daniel Mann, *The Mountain Road* (Columbia Pictures, 1960).

establishment counterculture phenomenon of the 1960s. Simultaneously, a burgeoning media presence in the daily lives of Americans through the affordability of consumer goods, especially televisions, gave average citizens better access to political platforms. Popular media was able to increasingly take part in the counterculture movement through the breakdown of WWII-era censorship standards following a Supreme Court decision that filmmaking was protected under the first amendment a decade prior.[116] Identity politics became a significant part of this trend, which materialized in the Civil Rights movement and the Women's Liberation movement. East-Asian minorities, however, experienced unique hurdles to organization, including decades of intraethnic conflict promoted by the cooperation of East-Asian actors in the perpetuation of Yellow Peril, Perpetual Foreigner, and Exotic Conquest stereotypes. The ability to organize an effective political alliance would depend on the ability of East-Asian minorities to refigure their own pasts and to subvert stereotypically imagery that undermined their cause. For largely the first time since the filmmaking of Marion Wong and James B. Leong in the 1930s and 1960s, East-Asian filmmakers returned to film narratives as a form of political discourse.[117]

The Yellow Power Movement

As East-Asian communities became increasingly outspoken, many of the most obvious of East-Asian stereotypical renditions in popular media decreased in usage. The expansive circulation of persistent stereotypes over successive generations that modern popular media made possible had served to justify decades of racially restrictive immigration policies and intrusive military action in Korea. The damage wrought by persistent media stereotypes could no longer be ignored.[118] While some East-Asian American scholars argue that the earliest steps

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[116] Wheeler Winston Dixon and Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *A Short History of Film*, 2nd ed., (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013): 171.
[117] Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens*, 20-23.
[118] Feng, ed., *Screening Asian Americans*, 8-9.

toward a collaborative pan-ethnic identity were the result of American-born generations of East-Asian minorities growing up in an American media culture that regularly altered its stance on friend v. foe East-Asian minorities,[119] others suggest its emergence had more to do with wide-spread 1960s civil justice movements.[120] Emblematic of both of these arguments, cooperative pan-ethnic East-Asian protest movements organized initially as part of the anti- Vietnam War movement. Central to their concerns was the understanding that American military interference in Vietnam and the misguided determination to see the conflict through despite the abhorrent cost of life on all sides were both the result of systemic Anti-Asian racism in America.[121]

The *Los Angeles Free Press* was the first to identify the Yellow Power Movement by name in 1969, alternatively called the Asian American Movement. The group coalesced over growing resentment to mistreatment, stereotypical representation, and the increasing need for an established identity in segregated American society.[122] Members of the Yellow Power Movement intermingled with other groups that promoted ethnic representation, such as Richard Aoki, who was additionally affiliated with the Black Panthers and the Asian American Political Alliance. Aoki spoke to the significance of identity in these social-political movements of the 1960s when he reiterated the sentiments of that age to his biographer. He said, "Up to that point, we had been called Orientals. Oriental was a rug that everyone steps on, so we ain't no Orientals. We were Asian Americans."[123] Collaborative pan-ethnic identity began first on the east coast on college

[119] Feng, ed., *Screening Asian Americans*, 136-138.
[120] Ishizuka, *Serve the People*, 6-9.
[121] *Ibid*., 97-104.
[122] *Ibid.*, 59.
[123] *Ibid.*, 61-62.

campuses, where the anti-war movement was strongest, but it quickly spread to the interior where other civil rights activities were mobilizing in the late 1960s.[124]

Encouraged by the growing Civil Rights Movement, the less historically remembered Yellow Power Movement adopted the term for their own purposes. The Yellow Power Movement in the 1960s made prominent use of pan-ethnic East-Asian identity to strength its center and promote cooperation. As some scholars of this period contend, the establishment of a multinational idea of Asian-Americanness is itself an "invention based on political goals rather than a sense of cultural commonality." Jun Xing, the film historian and ethnic scholar, goes on to explain, "Brought together by their common racial status and experience in American society, Asians have formed strategic political coalitions, to protect and advance their own interests."[125] However, the willful genesis of a collaborative pan-ethnic identity also served to undermine modern historical narratives of ethnic acrimony and conflict, effectively denouncing decades of Hollywood renditions of East-Asian cultural history.

Dr. Amanda Kearney, who specializes in race relations and the politics of place at the University of Adelaide, argued that the creation of ethnic identity is very natural and anticipated within the field of memory studies. "Present realities of ethnic strength and vulnerability are often key to understanding contemporary political movements articulated around ethnically prescribed boundaries," she claimed.[126] The historical abuses and stereotypical representation of Asian characters in Hollywood created the perfect environment to motivate the members of divergent ethnic minorities to reconfigure itself as a racial one. She cited ethnography studies (the study of a culture from within) and narrative as valuable methods for understanding the

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[124] Zia, *Asian American Dreams*, 48-49.
[125] Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens*, 22.
[126] Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering, eds., *Research Methods for Memory Studies*, Research Methods for the Arts and Humanities (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 132.

complex links between "memory, national identities, [and the] process of remembering and decision making regarding unity."[127] Whether unconsciously or intentionally, Asian American filmmakers' involvement in the establishment of a pan-ethnic East-Asian identity through public media created an ethnographic narrative experience for their audiences that simultaneously facilitated the invention of a common identity and provided a blueprint for memory scholars to understand how these shared memories came to be.

Empowered by the demonstrations and denouncements of stereotypes and oppression forced upon Asian Americans, filmmakers utilized narrative, documentaries, and independent artistic productions to participate in the Yellow Power Movement. This upsurge in Asian American film production in the 1960s and 1970s could then be displayed to the public and consumed by Asian American viewers as a cooperative racial group. Through these films, individual experiences, including those of only a single ethnicity within the spectrum, could become shared cultural memories. These cultural memories through film, which cultural theorist and ethnic memory scholar Stuart Hall called "imaginative rediscovery," allowed East-Asian Americans to shed some of the divisions between them through a retelling of the past.[128] In many cases, these films resonated with members of the Asian American community and were influential to these specific audiences because of the way that these films presented counter-narratives. These "alternative forms of remembering and forgetting (rooted in the personal, immediate and particular), counter memories create an autonomous cultural space for marginalized social groups."[129]

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[127] Keightley and Michael Pickering, eds., *Research Methods for Memory Studies*, 133.
[128] Inez Hedges, *World Cinema and Cultural Memory*, (London: Palgrave Macmillian UK, 2015), 4.
[129] Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens,* 163.

Documentary and Historical Memory

Japanese American directors participated in this counter-narrative process by sharing their own experiences of internment during World War II. Robert Nakamura, often cited as the first significant Asian American film director, produced a documentary of his childhood memories as an internee in the 1972 film *Manzanar.* The film humanized the Japanese after decades of stereotypical vilification, for the purpose of being shared with audiences who could consume it as a collective. These communal counter-narratives, Nakamura explained, were vital in the 1970s because, "You can't get rid of [racism], so the alternative is to make films for ourselves so that it counteracts the internalizing of those images."[130] Nakamura continued making use of documentary in his later film, *Wataridori: Birds of Passage* (1975), in which he collected various stories of the experiences of first-generation Japanese Americans. The narrative of the film begins with some of Nakamura's own personal background, in which he discusses some of the experiences of his father. However, in a 2009 interview Nakamura gave for an oral history project for the Los Angeles FilmForum, the director explained that he came to realize that singular memories failed to communicate the full range of *Issei* (first-generation) experiences. As a result, he blended together three different sets of personal memories to flesh out a complete cultural narrative. Documentary filmmaking in the 1960s and 1970s, as described by the filmmaker Renee Tajima-Peña as "the sense that we Asian American artists were building a pan-Asian American culture from scratch," that blended together the personal lives of East-Asian minorities to be consumed across ethnic barriers, and to create connections based on similar experiences with systemic American racism.[131]

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[130] Robert A. Nakamua, *Alternative Projections: Experimental film in Los Angeles, 1945-1980,* interview by Pauline Stakelon and Adam Hyman, May 23, 2009. https://www.alternativeprojections.com/oral-histories/robert-nakamura/.

[131] Zia, *Asian American Dreams,* 270.

The "personal diary films," typically featuring a family member of the director whose story could then be shared with others, was a common cinematic method of the earliest Asian American filmmakers. The film historian Elizabeth Weis suggests that display of the creators' personal lives on the public stage indicated "the filmmakers' desire to understand themselves through their origins – genetic and ethnic."[132] Through the display of these personal histories in public space, viewers could be offered a place within the safety and community of the pan-ethnic East-Asian American family. Amy Holdsworth, a film and history scholar from the University of Glasgow, referred to this technique in memory studies as a "domestication" of oral history and cultural memory.[133] This intimacy was further established through the minimal use of narrators in films like *Manzanar, Watadori,* and other 1970s documentaries. By eliminating the intrusiveness of a third-person narrator, the demarcations between memories of the filmmakers' subject and the audience were blurred. Through the use of image and the solitary voices of the subjects, who speak directly to the members of the audience like a confidant, a viewer becomes an eyewitness to the oral histories of the film's characters.[134]

Other filmmakers took a more active approach in locating barriers to pan-ethnic East-Asian identity and used the power of the camera to promote empathetic observation across these divides. Eddie Wong sought to do so across generations in his 1971 documentary film, *Wong Sinsaang*. The film featured the daily life of his father as the owner of a laundry establishment in an affluent neighborhood in Los Angeles. Filmed covertly between ironing boards and fan blades or behind doors, Wong captured the everyday humiliations his father endured from racist customers. Wong's initial contempt for his father, whom he feels is too submissive in the face of

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[132] Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens*, 90.
[133] Keightley and Pickering, *Research Methods for Memory Studies*, 91.
[134] Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens*, 99.

these quotidian abuses, begins to develop an understanding of his father's love of art and Chinese poetry. The emotional strength his father maintained through traditional cultural practices is exposed to the viewers through shots of the man's Tai Chi practice, serving both as a symbolic emblem of cultural pride and as a bridge between ethnic diverse minorities bound by spiritual commonalities.

Wong Sinsaang captured the frustration experienced between generations of East-Asian Americans through the narrative of a young man growing up in 1970s America and his first-generation immigrant father. As the film progresses, Wong's resentment dissolves as he discovers that his father's meekness indicates sacrifice and hope for his son's future rather than weakness. Community constructing films such as this, or Christine Choy's *Mississippi Triangle* (1984) featuring a bi-racial Black Chinese woman, offered pathways for viewers to be critical of the assumptions they held about insider and outsider status.[135]

Feature Films and East-Asian American Identity

The film depictions of East-Asian American experience would begin to shift sharply away from documentary and into popular fiction and family dramas in the 1980s, and with it, filmmakers would take a more direct approach to defining the East-Asian American community. The films of this period would instigate an erosion of the assumptions of fixed racial and cultural coding, emphasizing instead an ethnic East-Asian fluidity and a diversification of East-Asian American experience that would transform the image of racial heterogeneity.[136] Cited as the leader of this shift, Wayne Wang's *Chan is Missing* (1981) took a unique approach to characterize the East-Asian experience in America.

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[135] Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens*, 98-99.
[136] *Ibid.*, 140.

The film's title is a nod to the famous fictional Chinese-immigrant, Honolulu based detective of the film noir age. Wang's cinematography, filmed in black and white, with a melodramatic score at moments of discovery and script references to the famed character drive this point home. However, *Chan is Missing* works to erase the history and familiarity of the character by reversing the roles. Chan, in this case, refers to a San Francisco taxi driver named Chan Hung who may have willfully disappeared with the $50,000 he promised to use to obtain a taxi license for the film's central character, Jo. Jo (played by Wood Loy) and his nephew, Steve (played by Japanese American Marc Hayashi) go in search of him, uncovering a series of unhelpful clues along the way. The majority of their finds are placeholders for these clues, such as a portion of wall marked by adhesive, clearly empty of a once-significant photograph, or a newspaper with an article neatly cut out from the middle. Coming up empty, the two central characters interview local Chinatown residents that all provide contradictory accounts of Chan, his recent activities, and his possible whereabouts. By the end of the film, Chan is never recovered, though Jo's money is returned by Chan's daughter, and the film closes as Jo holds a photograph of the missing man. Chan is obscured in shadow, hidden from the viewer even in the final scene, as Jo remarks, "here is a picture of Chan Hung, but I still can't see him."[137]

The notable Asian American scholar Peter Feng makes use of another Charlie Chan analogy in his reading of this film. In Feng's *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video*, he references an analogy that Charlie Chan makes between the perfect crime and a donut in *Charlie Chan in Paris*. Feng points out that the more that the central characters pursue the mystery, the more the question to be solved is not "where has Chan gone?" but "who is

[137] Wayne Wang, *Chan Is Missing* (New Yorker Films, 1982).

Chan?"[138] Chan's increasingly elusive identity serves to widen the "hole" and with it the viewers' understanding of how East-Asian American identity was to be interpreted. This is further exaggerated as the plot moves forward, with conflicting stories of Chan's involvement in a rally between Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese supporters, or a brief trip to Manillatown, in which the camera pans away from the characters to a loudspeaker that drowns out all lingual differences between the characters.[139] Wang uses these techniques to disorient the viewer and establish a more collective sense of East-Asian American identity undefined by ethnicity. Simultaneously, by utilizing the memory of the iconic Charlie Chan as the impetus to this transformation, Wang circumvents the past, including the validity of European American Hollywood stereotypes imposed on Asian Americans and the historical legacy that once favored Chinese Americans over Japanese Americans.

This still from the final scene of *Chan is Missing* shows the photograph of the elusive Chan Hung. The obscurity of identity in Wang's film symbolized the convoluted process of crafting an East-Asian American identity. Wang's casting choices, divergent use of spoken and written language, and the dissolving formulaic noir story arcs are valuable tools of semiotic analysis to understanding how East-Asian American filmmakers actively participated in identity construction.
Wang, Wayne. *Chan Is Missing*. New Yorker Films, 1982.

[138] Feng, *Identities in Motion*, 160.
[139] Wang, *Chan Is Missing*.

As a collective pan-ethnic identity, the Yellow Power Movement staged protests and lobbied for a variety of issues, most chiefly for the end of the Vietnam war, for reparations for the Japanese American internees and their families from the federal government, and for the development of pan-ethnic East-Asian American cultural and historical studies in American universities. Other more specific events that drew the ire of the new Asian American Movement was imprisonment and unnecessarily lengthy release of Korean immigrant Chol Soo Lee, who was falsely convicted for the murder of a Chinese man. The majority of these protests resulted in degrees of success and the attraction of larger numbers of pan-ethnic East-Asians to the movement. The Yellow Power Movement eventually came to an end shortly after the end of the Vietnam War eliminated the main impetus for collective ethnic protest.[140] East-Asian American filmmaking continued, however, and maintained ongoing discourses of pan-ethnic East-Asian identity.

The end of the 1970s and early 1980s witnessed the introduction of a new genre to the American film industry: the martial arts film. This category of actions films originated in China and was initially made available to American audiences through translations shipped out of Hong Kong. The popularity of the genre was largely the result of Bruce Lee's rise to fame in the 1970s. The dissemination of the martial arts film proved to be a source of pride for many young Asian Americans, who now had established popular media figures to point to as positive images of the newly labeled "Asian American." This genre was particularly valuable for countering emasculating images of the East-Asian man perpetuated by the Exotic Conquest and Model Minority stereotypes.[141]

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[140] Nadra Kareem Nittle, "History of the Asian American Civil Rights Movement," ThoughtCo., February 10, 2019, https://www.thoughtco.com/asian-american-civil-rights-movement-history-2834596.
[141] Dong, *Hollywood Chinese.*

East-Asian American filmmakers, however, did not largely partake in the martial arts genre. The archetypal themes of the martial arts genre, especially traditional practices of mental and spiritual development, did offer some empowerment for media depictions of East-Asian masculinity, but little opportunity remained to diversify these stories. Of even greater concern was recycling of old stereotypes that undermined these roles. Imported martial arts pictures from Hong Kong in which Bruce Lee played starring roles were rarely reflected in American film production. Instead, Lee was more often cast in supportive roles, such as his role as Kato, the butler, chauffeur, and masked sidekick in the superhero television series *The Green Hornet* (1966-1967).[142]

Contrary to expectation, many of the films from this period were not the result of East-Asian American direction. Much of the artistic praise for these films and for the "discovery" of Asian American film stars went to directors like Robert Clouse, director of Bruce Lee's most famous film, *Enter the Dragon* (1973) and Jackie Chan's first American film, *The Big Brawl* (1980). Increasingly, the leads would be cast to Caucasian action stars, such as Chuck Norris in *A Force of One* (1979). Relegated to support roles, such as Pat Morita's renditions of Mr. Miyagi in the *Karate Kid* franchise (1984-1994), East-Asian America actors again found themselves depicting ritual cultural practices in ridiculous and unintelligible fashion (such as Miyagi's infamous "wax on/wax off" block training) and reciting words of wisdom reminiscent of Charlie Chan. The reiteration of these stereotypical motifs from the noir age, which exaggerated the outsider status of the humble sage (Miyagi lives alone and seemingly is ostracized because of his profession as a janitor), in many ways did more harm than good for East-Asian American

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142 Zia, *Asian American Dreams*, 277.

representation.[143] Due to the limited opportunities to explore diverse East-Asian communities or modern East-Asian American experience, the martial arts genre was rarely utilized by East-Asian American filmmakers in the 1970s and 1980s.

European American directors used comedy to create less threatening East-Asian male characters in martial arts films. Robert Clouse used slapstick comedy in *The Big Brawl*, which reduced much of Jackie Chan's combat skills to mere accidents.
The Big Brawl, Warner Bros., 1980.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or go to http://bit.ly/BigBrawl.

Instead, East-Asian American filmmakers devoted their attention subverting media proliferation of the Model Minority stereotype. The term "model minority," was first used in a 1966 *New York Times Article* written by sociologist William Peterson, in which Peterson declared that the nature of Japanese made them best suited to assimilate to American culture. Once coined, the Model Minority stereotype largely supplanted other stereotypical depictions of East-Asian minorities. Interestingly, this term was largely applied to various East-Asian ethnicities in popular media rather than the emphasis typically applied to a single ethnicity within the race prior to the Yellow Power Movement, especially light-skinned Northern Chinese and Japanese.[144]

Model minority stereotypes typically praised East-Asian Americans and East-Asian immigrants as well-mannered and intelligent, however, these positive traits were benighted within overbearing social backwardness, passivity, and intellectual language barriers. The

[143] Adachi, *The Slanted Screen*.
[144] Ramasubramanian, "Television Exposure, Model Minority Portrayals, and Asian-American Stereotypes," https://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr26/ramasubramanian.htm.

negative facets were especially exaggerated in male characters, whose social awkwardness was often depicted as aggressive enough to mitigate their sexual opportunities with European American women, and thus served to preserve European American male cultural supremacy in the American imagination.

Parallel to the contest of masculine power and dominance on the silver screen, tensions between labor workers in the American Midwest were coming to a head in the early 1980s as the American economy sunk into an economic depression. Competition between high-quality Japanese vehicle imports with American made automobiles put pressure on average American factory workers who increasingly found themselves out of work. Political campaigning circulated the "Buy American!" slogan. This slogan emphasized an "us v. them," mindset in the Midwest that devolved into frequent events of anti-Asian racism, from the vandalization of Honda cars to stereotypically encoded rhetoric returning to political vernacular for the first time since the Japanese reconstruction period.[145]

Racist tension became a part of the daily discourse between blue-collar middle-class American workers and East-Asian communities. In the summer of 1982, two men partaking in the entertainment at a topless bar noticed a group of East-Asian men enter the building. The twosome, Robert Ebens and his adult step-son, approached the party and exchanged words. Ebens cursed out the men, incorrectly identifying them as Japanese, and accusing them as the reason he was out of work (although he was actually employed in a supervisory position at the local factory). Vincent Chin, a young man celebrating his bachelor party retaliated, though sources disagree over who struck the first blow. Both parties were ejected from the club, at which point Ebens returned to his vehicle to obtain a baseball bat he kept inside. Ebens and his

[145] Koshiro, *Trans-Pacific Racisms and the U.S. Occupation of Japan*, 1-2.

step-son, Michael Nitz, chased Chin several blocks, before capturing him. As Nitz held Chin in place, Ebens struck the defenseless man several times across the skull. Chin was rushed to a hospital but died after languishing for four days. He was buried the day after the date he had set for his wedding.[146]

Chin's murder occurred in public with many witnesses. Several of the dancers at the club reported hearing Ebens use racial epithets and they indicated the Ebens was the instigator of the fight. However, police officers did not contact them to gather information. Instead, Ebens's and Nitz's testimonies were weighed against that of Chin's friends who were with him in the club. Eben ardently denied starting the fight or being a racist, and he and his wife arranged interviews with the media to proclaim his innocence before the case went to trial. The two were given the opportunity to plead down to manslaughter, despite the statement of a witness who came forward claiming that Ebens offered him a small sum of money to help him catch Chin.[147] This witness was not asked to testify against Ebens or Nitz. Instead Judge Charles Kaufman, who presided over the case, sentenced the defendants to three years of probation and $3,000 fine. Kaufman justified the sentence because he had determined that Chin had caused the argument and that neither Ebens nor Nitz had a previous record. Kaufman argued that the men were pillars of the community and that he felt putting them in prison would not "do them or the community any good."[148]

The East-Asian American communities responded with grief and outrage at the result. Chinese American writers took to publishing their concerns in *East/West: The Chinese American Journal*, which attracted the attention of the NAACP and the ACLU. Protests broke out across

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[146] Joe T. Darden and Richard W. Thomas, *Detroit: Race Riots, Racial Conflicts, and Efforts to Bridge the Racial Divide*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 155-156.
[147] Christine Choy and Renee Tajima-Peña, *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* PBS, 1987.
[148] Darden and Richard W. Thomas, *Detroit*, 156.

the state, participated in by multiracial demonstrators carrying signs demanding “We Want Justice!” and “It’s Not Fair!” (Chin’s final words as he lay bleeding in the street). Of particular interest, the protests attracted the support of a diverse pan-ethnic East-Asian Community. Chol Soo Lee traveled to Michigan from California to speak about his experience of being falsely jailed and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1973 as an indication of rampant racism in the criminal justice system. Lee expressed his commitment to advocating for cooperation across ethnic lines to maintain strong pan-ethnic East-Asian lobbying and civil rights advocacy. The protests also attracted the support of the prominent Japanese attorney, Daniel Hoekenga, to legally defend the protest movement. Eventually, the group coalesced behind the creation of the American Citizens for Justice (ACJ). The ACJ spearheaded a campaign to have Kaufman’s sentencing overruled, and while ultimately unsuccessful, the civil rights group gained the credence of bringing Chin’s murder to nationwide attention. The policies of the group rippled

Still from the 1987 documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* After being nominated for an Academy Award, the film was broadcast on PBS. It has been credited for bringing national attention to the Vincent Chin murder and helping to encourage pan-ethnic East-Asian American outcry to the light sentences given to Ebens and Nitz.
Choy, Christine, and Renee Tajima-Peña. *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* PBS, 1987.

outward and were significant to the organization of pan-ethnic collaboration among East-Asian Americans in the 1980s.[149]

Following the Yellow Power Movement, an increasing number of East-Asian American film directors began working on projects to identify the nature of the East-Asian American experience and identity in the post-Vietnam-era. Chief among the features explored during this period, these filmmakers employed mnemonic tactics to explore the ongoing construction of these social identities as a hybridization of cultural and personal experiences.[150] Much of the cross-cultural aspects shared among these ethnic groups, such as the practice of philosophical belief systems like Buddhism or historically interrelated writing/language systems, were the same features which had been bastardized and formalized into symbols of stereotype.[151] By reclaiming these elements into East-Asian American cinematography, filmmakers could participate in the development of a pan-ethnic East-Asian minority. The establishment of communal ethnic landscapes, including those that were not "neatly bound communities of memory" instead could employ shared memories of language, religion, and nationality to overcome ethnic boundaries. [152]

Explorations of the variant experiences of immigration were one such tool utilized by East-Asian American directors during this period. Michael Toshiyuki made use of this approach in his 1988 film, *The Wash*. The feature film's plot circulates around the failing marriage of an aging *Nisei* (Japanese born immigrant) couple. Having met in an internment camp during World War II, Masi (played by Nobu McCarthy) and Nobu (played by Mako) are in the process of

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[149] Darden and Richard W. Thomas, *Detroit*, 159-164.
[150] Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens*, 140.
[151] King, *Lost in Translation*, 53-56.
[152] Keightley and Pickering, *Research Methods for Memory Studies*, 116.

negotiating how to behave in one another's presence after a recent separation. Central to the story is Nobu's romantic and sexual exploits with a new love, Sadao, which are heavily dominated by participation in typical American dating culture. From romantic picnics to recreational fishing trips and nights at the movie theater, Nobu experiences love and courtship that contrast heavily to her decades' long marriage to a cold and emotionally abusive husband. Masi's own life is largely unchanged, filled with hours of television and his passionate lifelong pastime of kite construction. Despite their differences, Nobu still returns regularly to Masi's home to aide him with his domestic needs and occasionally to engage in sex.[153]

The film looked at divergent aspects of the immigrant experience by contrasting the parents' lives with that of their children. The couple's two daughters have different sentiments on their father's inflexible traditionalism and their perspectives are responsible for the relationship (or lack thereof) that each has with the family dynamic. *The Wash* also countered common American majority assumptions on the familial and social dynamics of the Japanese American experience. The film's plot presented a very different image of East-Asian family cohesiveness, rife with marital strife and frustrations over the demands of culture, gender, and sex. Masi's and Nobu's status as an elderly couple also explored topics of sexuality in late adulthood, a subject often overlooked in the wider American film market.[154] The deconstruction of these troupes simultaneously subverted stereotypical narratives as well as broadened the accessibility of pan-ethnic Asian American status to older generations that may have felt excluded from the student civil protests of the Yellow Power Movement.

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[153] Michael Toshiyuki Uno, *The Wash* (Skouras Pictures, 1988).
[154] Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens*, 133-134.

1980s films by Asian American directors, such as *The Wash*, include subjects of race to further the multiethnic understanding of Asian American identity in ways not typically utilized by other American directors at this time. For example, the impetus of Masi's and Judy's (the youngest daughter) conflict in the film is Judy's marriage to a black man and her parentage of biracial children. As significant as this is to their relationship in the film, the actual confrontations between them about the subject of race do not appear in the film.[155] By alluding to their existence, the subject of race adds dimension to the multiplicity of races within the East-Asian American identity, but by downplaying this factor within the film itself, the implication is that biracial status alone is not enough to exclude anyone from finding recognition within the East-Asian American community.

Lise Yasui's approach to family relationships and the past also features some use of biracial identification. Herself the daughter of a Caucasian woman and a Japanese man, Yasui's documentary, *A Family Gathering* (1988), discusses her search for identity through family photos of scores of blue-eyed cousins from her mother's side of the family. Once again, Yasui's biracial status is pushed into the background, overshadowed by the greater significance of establishing an understanding of her own familial background. Her family's past is dominated by a legacy of memory regulation and erasure. Much of this obscured or adulterated memory has been sanitized through stories told by her father, whose own painful memories of internment have caused him to keep many secrets. Eventually, Yasui comes to discover that both her grandfather and her oldest uncle passed away before her birth by suicide. The intensity of the family's need to eliminate these painful memories influenced Yasui's oldest surviving uncle to take on the honorary title *Chonan* (eldest son) as if their older brother had never existed. Yasui's

[155] Toshiyuki Uno, *The Wash*.

search encourages the family to revisit some old family movies, including those of her grandfather, to bring his memory back into the family. The documentary was picked up by PBS and nominated for an Oscar.[156] However, after a few decades of experimental independent documentaries, family drama feature films like *The Wash* proved to have greater appeal to widespread audiences. Thus, Asian American filmmakers would make greater use of the genre as a means of breaking into the popular film market.

Among these, one of the most successful of the 1980s would be Wayne Wang's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1989), based on Louis Chu's groundbreaking novel of the Chinese American experience. The film combined themes of immigration and the family drama. The film is set in New York City's Chinatown in the year 1949 and opens with an introduction of the history of American immigration law. For Chinese immigrant men who came to the United States twenty years prior for employment opportunities, the community is a wasteland of loneliness and heartache. Many have wives in China they have not been able to see for two decades. The picture captures the plight and isolation these immigrants experience, unable to visit home if they hope to return to the United States and denied the opportunity to welcome visiting family members due to the Chinese Exclusion Act.

The film follows Ben Loy (played by Russell Wong), who has earned the right to marry and bring home a wife from China due to his service in World War II, thanks to the newly instated Chinese War Brides Act. In an effort to appeal to his father and to satisfy his own desires for companionship, Ben Loy concedes to an arranged marriage with the daughter of her father's friend. The bride in question, Mei Oi (played by Cora Miao), is equally eager to come to the United States and meet her father, who has been living there since before her birth.

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[156] Feng, *Identities in Motion*, 71-72.

Her arrival excites the entire Chinatown community. The brand-new husband and wife are the first local couple of childbearing age in quite some time and everyone is eager to provide advice and encouragement. The pressure from the couple's fathers is the most insistent of all the well-wishers, including a daytime visit by Ben Loy's father (played by Victor Wong) at the young man's place of employment. The older man expresses concern for his son's ability to provide him with a grandson, and physically grabs his own groin while asking his son, "Do you know what to do with this?"[157] The pressure proves too much for Ben Loy and he is unable to consummate his marriage, leaving Mei so frustrated that she drowns her despair in the arms of another lover. The confrontation between traditionalism, familial expectations, culture, and the tensions of immigration all serve to dysfunction the marriage and instigate the affair that rocks the local "bachelor town".[158] The absence of a child is the most obvious hurdle between the establishment of their Chinatown population as a fully-fledged community and without it, the inhabitants remain truly foreign in the American landscape.

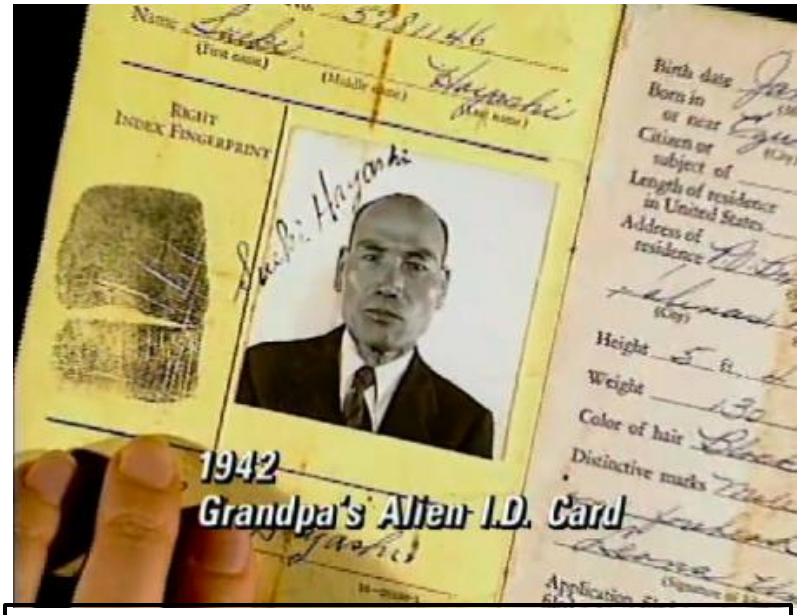
Divergent East-Asian American Identities and Community at the Close of the 20th Century

The filmmakers of the 1990s would also utilize family dramas to discuss and imagine Asian American identity, however, the looming turn of the century encouraged many to employ a forward-thinking approach to looking at those who had previously been excluded. Missing portions of the past, ignored (sometimes unintentionally) or repressed experiences, emerged in post-structuralist historical scholarship as an entirely separate element of elucidating the past. Emerging concurrently with cultural, memory, and film scholarship in historiography, East-Asian cinematography employed renewed attention to divergent identities with East-Asian

[157] Wayne Wang, *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (Columbia Pictures, 1988).
[158] Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens*, 129-130.

American experience in the 1990s. The introduction of avant-garde films in the late 1980s and 1990s seem to align with this kind of memory, especially for female filmmakers.

The Vietnamese filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha discussed the freedom of film as art to explore these subjects. By abandoning some of the more conventional expectations of the film genre, such as narrative, or the notions of a story's need for a beginning, middle, and end, filmmakers that were often excluded from the industry were capable of approaching "popular memory, storytelling, 'truth,' and history for women of color," in ways that other filmmakers had not.[159] Rea Tajiri is one of these filmmakers, whose unusual approach to documentary as an "impressionist" film in *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige* (1991) attempted to fill in the gaps between "personal and popular memory."[160] In the search for her own family history, Tajiri needed to "forget" the internalized images of the Japanese ethnicity permeated through American culture by the Hollywood industry. The



Documentary "personal diary" films were heavily utilized by the first wave of East-Asian American filmmakers in the 1960s. These intimate works reworked popular media narratives East-Asian history and dissolved ethnic barriers through the discussion of shared racial oppression.
Tajiri, Rea. *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige*. Women Make Movies, 1991.

[159] Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens*, 157.
[160] *Ibid.*, 161.

Rea Tajiri alternates between using singular and plural pronouns to distort barriers between the viewer and the subject as she narrates her film *History and Memory: For Akiko and Takashige.* Women Make Movies, 1991.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or go to http://bit.ly/HistoryandMemory.

movement of time is dispensed unequally through her film, sometimes elongated or shortened, and other times moving anachronistically to simulate the disorientation of negotiating media messages about her ethnic heritage and her familial memories (or the memories members of her family have chosen to forget).[161] Art provided a means for women to engage with film because their stylist approaches already operated outside of the mainstream of the film community, and therefore were not perceived as threatening to the industry at large.

Other filmmakers made use of their subject matter as a way to look at excluded portions of the Asian American identity. Much like the female filmmakers, these directors needed to make use of a non-threatening means to introduce their vision to the critique of wider Asian American audiences. After graduating from New York University's film program in the mid-1980s and winning NYU's film competition, the visionary director Ang Lee failed to acquire a production company willing to fund his films about non-nuclear East-Asian American families. Lee took his scripts to Taiwan instead. The success of Lee's first film, *Pushing Hands* (1991),

[161] Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens*, 161-162.

attracted the attention of the American film production company Central Motion Pictures. *Pushing Hands* was rereleased to American audiences the following year.[162]

The picture explored the dynamics across generations, depicted through the interactions between an aging Tai Chi master, Mr. Chu, and the family of his adult son, Alex. Alex is married to a European American woman, Martha, and together the couple has a young son, Jeremy. While Alex works away from home during the day as a computer technician, a position he maintains and takes great comfort in as a mark of his successful assimilation to American society, Mr. Chu stays home with Martha, a professional writer. However, tensions quickly arise when Mr. Chu's cultural diet, dress, and routine infringe with Martha's lifestyle and writing schedule. This also creates marital strife between Alex and his wife, as Alex feels pulled behind the demands to demonstrate traditional Confucian filial piety towards his father as expected of his Chinese upbringing and to alleviate his wife's concerns as a domestic

Mr. Chu's traditional practices are the catalysts for the culture clash events in *Pushing Hands*. While Mr. Chu's traditional cultural practices give him a sense of peace, they frustrate his daughter-in-law and cause conflict. Simultaneously, Mr. Chu teaches Tai Chi to his American grandson, which allows them to connect across language barriers. Tai Chi itself is an allusion to the immigrant experience, wherein one must learn to go with the momentum of a new culture to remain grounded, but this can be done without surrendering to it.
Lee, Ang. *Pushing Hands*. Central Motion Pictures, 1992.

[162] Feng, *Identities in Motion*, 182.

American male.[163] Privately, Martha also struggles with feelings of being an outsider due to language barriers that leave her unable to participate in familial conversations between Mr. Chu and Alex.[164] The ongoing tensions eventually encourage Mr. Chu to break with Chinese tradition and to leave his son's family home. He finds a position as a dishwasher in a Chinatown restaurant to support himself and the film comes to a close as Mr. Chu develops a heroic reputation in his local community for standing up to the cruel restaurant owner and his cronies. The film's unanswered questions about how to balance East-Asian and American identities imply that there are no clear cut solutions to modern pressures to conform, but a sense of belonging within East-Asian American identity and community can take on a myriad of forms.[165]

The success of Lee's *Pushing Hands*, especially in its ability to impart stories of East-Asian American experience in a way that would appeal to American audiences, was determined through Lee's skillful use of comedy.[166] Lee employed the genre again to break down heteronormative assumptions embedded within the Model Minority stereotype in his 1993 film, *The Wedding Banquet*.[167] The film stars Winston Chao as Wai-Tung Gao, a gay Taiwanese immigrant in a relationship with an American man named Simon (played by Mitchell Lichtenstein). Under pressure by his family to marry, Wei-Tung concocts a plan to marry an illegal immigrant facing homelessness and deportation to divert attention away from his sexual and romantic life. While the marriage would be real, rewarding the young woman, Wei-Wei (played by May Chin) with a green card and financial security, the actual farce of the romantic union was known to all the participants.

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[163] Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens*, 138.
[164] Ang Lee, *Pushing Hands*, (Central Motion Pictures, 1992).
[165] Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens*, 145.
[166] Feng, *Identities in Motion*, 182-184.
[167] Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen, eds., *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007): 264-265.

However, Simon's and Wei-Tung's relationship is put to the test when Wei-Tung and his new bride, after a day of drunken celebration, have sex on their wedding night and Wei-Wei becomes pregnant. Under mounting pressure from all sides, further aggravated by his father's degrading health, Wei-Tung confesses to his mother about the true nature of his relationship with Simon. While she insists that Wei-Tung keep his secret, his father has already put the pieces together on his own. Surprisingly, the older man is willing to overlook modern criticisms of homosexuality and expresses his support for the relationship. Wei-Tung and Simon reconcile and the three agree to a cooperative relationship where both men will be parents to Wei-Wei's child and the marriage will remain intact to protect her citizenship.[168]

The use of comedy eased audiences apprehensive to the idea of homosexuality in East-Asian American spaces, either due to conservatism, defensiveness of racial pride, or lingering fears of Yellow Peril stereotypes of sexual diversity. A large part of the humor was negotiated through the social pressures of married life and generational divides, while other jokes tackled the subject of culture (or specifically culture clash). The particularities of playful and raucous celebratory Chinese wedding traditions and the hilarious pitfalls of navigating cultural ideas on sexuality welcomed outsiders to the more private world of Chinese ethnicity.[169] The film also subverted some historical legacies of stereotypical humor, where Simon's limited Mandarin skills caused him to appear awkward and silly.[170] The film also approached queerness in a neutral and non-threatening manner. Insulated from more aggressive depictions of

[168] Ang Lee, *The Wedding Banquet* (The Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1993).
[169] Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens*, 161.
[170] Lee, *The Wedding Banquet*.

homosexuality, including any scenes or suggestions of anal intercourse or homosexual sex, Lee's film provided a soft platform for mitigated voices within East-Asian American identity.[171]

Lee's active disruption of stale stereotypical model minority narratives of East-Asian America paid off. *The Wedding Banquet* was nominated for both an Academy Award and Golden Globe and earned $7 million in the American box office.[172] The success of Lee's filmmaking encouraged Hollywood to produce more East-Asian American films and set the stage for the release of *The Joy Luck Club* in 1993. Released a month after *The Wedding Banquet*, Wayne Wang's *The Joy Luck Club* has largely been recorded by film historians as the first major commercial Asian American film success.[173] Told in four parts, *The Joy Luck Club* is the story of four mothers and daughters whose relationships suffer the strain of familial tension and culture clash. Part coming-of-age story and part generational drama, each of the young women come to understand their mother's ethnic heritage and parenting through cross-cultural conflict. For one of the daughters, it is the choice to marry a Caucasian man and for another, it is the pressure to meet her mother's high expectations after being raised in a perceived environment of greater opportunity than her mother had. More importantly, *The Joy Luck Club* took the multi-ethnic thematic elements of Michael Toshiyuki's *The Wash*, Lise Yasui's *A Family Gathering* and Wayne Wang's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* and made them applicable to the broad American viewership.

It was the very success of *The Joy Luck Club* that initially distressed East-Asian communities upon the film's release. In a precursor to the third wave feminism and #METOO movement of the 21st century, the 1991 public ousting of Supreme Court nominee Clarence

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[171] Feng, *Identities in Motion*, 184-185.
[172] Zia, *Asian American Dreams*, 276.
[173] Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens*, 184.

Thomas for sexual harassment allegations by former colleagues, had already reinvigorated the feminism movement for the 1990s and primed audiences for Wang's cinematic imaging of the relationship between Chinese mothers and daughters.[174] However, the popular success of the endeavor received a backlash from East-Asian American audiences that were skeptical of the authenticity of such a rendition that could capture broad American attention.[175] Chief among these critiques to authenticity was Wang's choice to use a multiethnic cast for some of the film's central characters, including Vietnamese actress France Nuyen and Japanese actress Tamlyn Tomita. Wang defended his casting choices in interviews with the *New York Times* because so few acting options were made available to East-Asian American actresses due to the dominance of white-washing in modern American filmmaking. Denying the roles of a Chinese character to ethnically Japanese, Vietnamese, or Korean actresses, he argued, would disservice the East-Asian American community as a whole.[176]

Film historian, Peter X. Feng, examined the apparent hypocrisy that allowed Wang to cross-ethnic boundaries in his casting while East-Asian scholarship typically decries the same behavior of European American filmmakers. Feng argued that Wang's casting choices were reminiscent of early filmmaking that destabilized ethnic history by exploring cross ethnic topics in Asian American filmmaking, such as in *Chan is Missing*. By blurring ethnic barriers within the Asian American community, an East-Asian American viewer's sense of identity is given permission to be fluid while he/she is also granted the freedom to disavow internalized Asian American stereotypes.[177] Similarly, East-Asian American actors found the success of *The Joy*

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[174] Crystal N. Feimster, "The Impact of Racial and Sexual on Women's History," *The Journal of American History* 99, no. 3 (December 2012): 823.
[175] Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen, eds., *Alien Encounters*, 16.
[176] Feng, *Identities in Motion*, 204-205.
[177] Feng, ed., *Screening Asian Americans*, 205-207.

Luck Club had accustomed European American audiences to East-Asian Americans using fluent American English, and many reported fewer requests for actors to adopt false accents or ethnic lingual patterns insincere to their own ethnic heritage.[178]

REPRESENTATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY AND THE FUTURE

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center buildings on September 11, 2001, at the beginning of the 21st century rocked the American psyche as the only other attack on American soil since the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1942. Emphasis of this fact was repeated several times in news media following the event, from Dan Rather's claim only hours after the second plane struck the east tower that the public was witnessing "the Pearl Harbor of terrorism," to media coverage of the New York skyline after the collapse of the towers with commentary calling September 11th a "day that would live in infamy." Reporters from the *Daily Telegraph* expressed concerns that President Bush would be incapable of offering the same kind of patriot passion and dignity that President Roosevelt did in his first national address after the attacks.[179]

In the aftermath of 9/11 the atmosphere was one of suspicion and grief, and much like Pearl Harbor, the American government sought to sooth the public with xenophobic border policies. The subsequent *USA PATRIOT Act* amended the *Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952* to establish more stringent visa verification procedures and bans were put in place to prevent immigrants with (at times, tangential) connects to terrorism from entering the United States. West and South Asian Muslim populations were placed under immense federal and public scrutiny; acts of violence against Muslim peoples across the United States in the months that followed warranted direct statements of disapproval within the body of the *USA PATRIOT Act*

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[178] Zia, *Asian American Dreams*, 276-277.

[179] Marcia Landy, "'America under Attack': Pearl Harbor, 9/11, and History in the Media," in *Film and Television After 9/11*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004): 79-85.

itself.[180] However, the plight of West and South Asians received little public reproach from Asian American civil rights organizations or privately in non-English language East-Asian newspapers.

Portrayals of the 9/11 attacks were also largely absent from the American feature film industry, even years after the event. The first Hollywood picture to depict the events of that day was *United 93* (2005), which recounted the passenger revolt on United Airlines 93 that caused the plane to crash before it could reach its intended target. While highly praised by critics, later critical analysis of the film noted the emphasis on specifically European American male leadership, heroism, and martyrdom in the film. European American businessmen are the first to report on the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks to their fellow passengers, which spurns a group of European American men aboard to concoct a plan to take down the hijackers. None of the passengers of color, including a young Japanese student named Toshiya Kuge, are shown to participate in this act of heroism.[181] Plots of courageous acts of sacrifice

Parry Shen as Ben Manibag in *Better Luck Tomorrow*. Paramount Pictures, 2002.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or go to http://bit.ly/BetterLuckTomorrow.

[180] *Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Interrupt and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT ACT) Act of 2001*, U.S. Statutes at Large 18 (2001): Sec. 102.

[181] Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo and Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo, *Projecting 9/11 : Race, Gender, and Citizenship in Recent Hollywood Films*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014), http://web.a.ebscohost.com.libproxy.library.wmich.edu/ehost/detail/detail?nobk=y&vid=1&sid=11ab2f0b-fef6-45d5-bd18-35f587a98944@sessionmgr4006&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ==#AN=885885&db=nlebk.

featuring European American male role models, particularly military films with the subject of protecting democratic values, were highly popular in the decade following the 9/11 attack.

This relegated East-Asian American actors, subjects, and settings in the 21st century back into some of the roles more common of the previous decades. Both praised and criticized by Asian American audiences, Justin Lin's *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002) betrayed Model Minority stereotypes with the story of a group of promising young East-Asian American high school students who descend into petty crime to break up the monotony their study routines. Eventually, the group becomes increasingly paranoid that one among them will turn them in for their crimes, so they contrive and act out a plan to murder their friend before he can snitch. Although the film was loosely based on the 1992 murder of Stuart Tay, it also included character depictions of the perpetrators that such as exaggerated intelligence, skillful trickery, and suggestions of a gang mentality that resurrected Yellow Peril motifs embedded within the stereotype of the awkward Asian mastermind.[182]

European American filmmakers were more on the nose in their stereotypical renditions of East-Asian minorities than Lin's work. Sofia Coppola uses culture clash as the setting for her 2003 *Lost in Translation,* which is a tale of social isolation and loneliness set in Japan. The film starred Bill Murray, who explored the foreign landscape of night-time Tokyo as an insomniac in search of friendship, which he finds in a young American college student. The two bond over their mutual bewilderment as they explore Tokyo's efforts and failures to recreate American pop culture: a saga of Perpetual Foreigners told in reverse. Rob Marshall's *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) returned to the Exotic Conquest troupe with the tale of blue-eyed Japanese girl on a quest to become a full-scale geisha through the sale of her virginity. Both of these received critical

[182] Nary Kim, "Too Smart for His Own Good? The Devolution of the 'Model' Asian American Student," *Asian American Law Journal* 20, no. 4 (2013): 93-98.

praise, with Oscars, Golden Globes, and Academy Awards bestowed on Coppola and Marshall, whereas praise for Lin's work remained within the circle of film festivals and cinematic art societies.

The success of these films and other early 21st-century depictions of East-Asian identity with the general American audience did not translate to grateful representation by East-Asian minority viewers. Initially praised as one of the first few films to have nearly an entire cast of Asian performers, *Memories of a Geisha* garnered critique in the United States and abroad for Marshall's choice to cast all Chinese and Chinese-Malay actresses as the picture's central characters. While the director defended his casting choice as a pragmatic decision based upon the skills and star power of the actresses, Japanese and Chinese citizens each expressed disapproval.[183] East-Asian Americans were equally displeased; the establishment of a pan-ethnic East-Asian American identity had not dissolved ethnic identities but rather strengthened them through the promotion of racial pride.

It is then unsurprising that a series of anti-whitewashing campaigns emerged in the 20th century, which benefited from the use of social media platforms. The convention of white-washing in cinema casting is based upon the hiring of a European American performer to fulfill the role of an ethnic minority character. The result of this practice is twofold; ethnic minorities lose out on employment opportunities that would have allowed them to represent their racial experience and ethnic culture before the public, but also that directorial distortions of minority characteristics or behaviors are more likely to be propagated by actors unfamiliar with the lived experiences of the role they are taking on.

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[183] BBC News, "Geisha Film-Makers Defend Casting," *BBC News*, December 8, 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4509318.stm.

White-washing has become increasingly common as a stand-in for the use of yellowface in cinema, though it is often perceived as equally offensive. In some cases, anti-white-washing protests come to the defense of disaffected victims of white-washing, such as was the case when Jim Sturgess was cast to play Ben Campbell in Robert Luketic's *21* (2008). The film was based on the true story of the MIT Blackjack Team, which developed card counting techniques to collect massive winnings at casino blackjack games, as was based on the real-life story of Jeff Ma. Campbell's character was a stand-in for Ma, who was hired as a consultant during the filming process. Ma dismissed the urging of East-Asian Americans to call out the casting of Sturgis, saying instead that he would have been more offended by casting of a Japanese or Korean actor, which would have implied that East-Asian ethnic identity was interchangeable.[184] Despite Ma's claims that he took no offense to the casting choice, East-Asian American anti-white-washing campaigners remain unresolved.

In 2015, Sony Pictures released *Aloha*, which sparked accusations of white-washing, cultural appropriation, and deference to the historical American military domination of the Hawai'ian islands. Juxtapositions between the cultural motifs of the native peoples, in both traditional pastimes and choice of a folk music soundtrack, are contrasted to images of American military paraphernalia. The implication of cultural differences is obvious, carrying with it stereotypical nuances that symbolized a traditional culture within easy reach of European American consumption and pleasure, but also one primitively frozen in time. The montage gives way to an introduction of a decorated, stern-faced Brian Gilcrest (played by Bradley Cooper), who is returning to Hawai'i by military jet to bestow his blessings on the construction a civilian bridge. On the landing strip below, Gilcrest's new military liaison awaits his arrival.

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[184] Scott Bowles, "New Film '21' Counts on the Real Deal for Inspiration," *USA Today*, 2008, https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/movies/news/2008-03-25-jeff-ma-21_N.htm#.

Her name is Allison Ng, and she is of ¼ Chinese and ¼ Hawai'ian descent, though this unrepresented through the casting of Emma Stone as the leading lady. With her hair dyed blond, the fair-skinned actress is certainly not in yellowface. What Stone does bring to the character, however, is her typical exaggerative gestures that immediately establish Ng as the comic relief of the picture and borders on an offensive Mickey Rooney-like rendition of East-Asian racial character. However, Ng is immediately framed against a shot of traditional male Hawai'ian dancers for contrast, which allowed for viewers to take comfort in the familiar Hollywood rendition of the goofy, awkward ethnic foreigner, both not one who is *that* foreign.[185]

Stone's play acting of otherness comes off as insincere, but it also mitigates the complex cultural and historical context of American and Hawai'ian contact, as well as the native peoples' inherited Polynesian traditions. As Gilcrest's negotiator, Ng is able to gain the support of King Kanahele and his isolated native community for the pedestrian gate project. While the film contains other plot elements that nod to 50s film noir and Communist paranoia (including an anticlimactic hacking of a nuclear satellite by the Chinese government that Gilcrest and Ng manage to thwart in the nick of time), the film's widespread appropriation of Hawai'ian culture also attracted disfavor from the East-Asian Community. In an interview with MSNBC, Guy Aoki raised the concerns organized by his foundation, Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA). The issues ranged from the film's title, which utilized a Hawai'ian word with complex contextual meanings, some of which connotated deeply emotional messages. Aoki also criticized the on set diversity of the films background actors. With actual census figures of a 70% non-European American population in the state, Aoki expressed disgust at the near-complete exclusion of an ethnic cast. "It's an insult to the diverse culture and fabric of Hawaii," he argued,

[185] Cameron Crowe, *Aloha*, Columbia Pictures, 2015.

referencing the long historical legacy of white-washing ethnic native Asian populations out of Hollywood productions.[186]

The pervasive nature of American stereotypes directed toward ethnically East-Asian populations did survive into the 21st century, but the advancement of communication and media technology-induced change as younger generations grew up in an environment that is increasingly globalized. After Crowe failed to respond to public pressures to reconsider his casting choices in *Aloha*, moviegoers communicated their displeasure in the form of poor box office earnings. The same was true of Rupert Sanders's *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), which sold poorly in the American box office and abroad after months of contention over the casting of Scarlett Johansson as the iconic Japanese cyborg created by Masamune Shirow in 1989.[187]

Prior to the release of *Ghost in the Shell* and in the immediate aftermath, users of the Chinese social media platforms Zhiru (**知乎**) and Baidu (**百度**) debated the casting choice. A user going by the name Empty (**空空**) managed a message stream debating the poor sales of *Ghost in a Shell*'s opening week. He argued that the politics of white-washing had greater significance within the United States, due to the organization and social/cultural realities of the Asian American movement, than it did in the Eastern world.[188] Some users expressed dismay at the white-washing practices of Hollywood, but resignation that a European American star may allow the picture to sell better.[189] Fellow posters compared side-by-side stills from earlier animated renditions of the series. According to the poster, who went by the name Ink Stained

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[186] Michael Nguyen, "'Aloha' Film Attacked for 'White-Washing' of Hawaii," MSNBC.com, June 2, 2015, http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/aloha-film-attacked-white-washing-hawaii.
[187] Zulekha Nathoo, "Casting Controversy, Reviews Blamed for Ghost in the Shell Failure at Box Office," CBC News.ca, April 2, 2017, https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/ghost-shell-box-office-poor-1.4052043.
[188] **空空**,【TNABO】**派拉蒙高**层："**洗白**"**争**议伤害了《攻壳机动队》，**百度**, April 6, 2017 (7:10).
[189] 马宏菩, **如何**评价《攻壳机动队》真人版预告片?, **知乎**, November 13, 2016, https://www.zhihu.com/question/52579278.

Sanders's *Ghost in a Shell* android geishas combined elements of the yellow peril, perpetual foreigner, and exotic conquest stereotypes. Though initially based on the characters from the animated series, the decorative face paint mimicking the Japanese national flag used Sanders's live-action version makes these threatening, unknowable, and inhuman machines symbolically linked to notions of national origin.
Sanders, Rupert. *Ghost in the Shell*. Paramount Pictures, 2017.

Snow (墨雪飘·痕), the trailer for the film contained elements pulled from several different renditions from the series' history. This poster found this to be evidence of the efforts of the filmmakers to remain faithful to Shirow's vision.[190] However, the poster missed some significant changes in the trailer. Firstly, all the Asian actors featured in the trailer (with the exception of a bystander walking in the background of a shot focused on Johannson) are either gang members or part of a horde of identical grasping hands determined to drag the heroes down. Even the geisha androids repurposed from the series' television run were redesigned in Sander's film with faces obscured beneath a large red orb of make-up, a mimic of the Japanese flag. The eyes of the androids have also been replaced from the large doll-like eyes in the animation series with two narrow, black, pupilless slits.[191] The final twist at the end of the film, that the central character was once a

[190] 墨雪飘·痕, 如何评价《攻壳机动队》真人版预告片?, 知乎, November 14, 2016, https://www.zhihu.com/question/52579278.
[191] Ghost in the Shell Official Trailer 1 (2017)-Scarlett Johansson Movie. Youtube, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4VmJcZR0Yg.

Japanese girl, whose physical body was improved to its best possible form (which just so happens to be Caucasian) was met by anger and condemnation by MANAA.[192]

For all the controversy of white-washing on the silver screen, television representation on East-Asian identity progressed by decades in a relatively short period of time. Prime-time series like ABC's *Dr. Ken* (2015-2017) and *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015-present) successfully appealed to broad American audiences through familiar sitcom archetypes. East-Asian American viewers responded favorably to the series as authentic portrayals of modern East-Asian American family life and contemporary pluralistic ethnic experience. *Fresh Off the Boat,* the first sitcom to feature an Asian American family since the aborted *All-American Girl*(1994) series,[193] garnered praise from East-Asian American communities for its use of bilingualism and the 1990s setting that allowed for racial commentary while avoiding offense through a widely conceptualized less progressive milieu.[194] Treading in more unfamiliar terrain, AMC's *The Walking Dead* has also received public praise for its treatment of American diversity. Set in a post-apocalyptic world, the series questions assumptions of masculinity and social constructs built upon racial paradigms. The series earned praise for its characterization of Glenn Rhee (played by Steven Yeun), an agile Korean pizza delivery boy, whose unique abilities to sneak in and out of zombie-infested areas makes him a vital addition of the team.

Helen K. Ho, a communications scholar specializing in studies of race and gender at Saint Mary's College, has argued that despite the good press received by the series, familiar

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[192] Sarah Ahern, "Asian American Media Group Accuses Scarlett Johansson of 'Lying' About 'Ghost in the Shell' Whitewashing Controversy," *Variety*, March 31, 2017, https://variety.com/2017/film/news/scarlett-johansson-ghost-in-the-shell-whitewashing-1202020230/.

[193] Katie Wong, "How Crazy Rich Asians Is Changing the Face of Hollywood." *Den of Geek!*, August 21, 2018, https://www.denofgeek.com/us/movies/crazy-rich-asians/275815/how-crazy-rich-asians-is-changing-the-face-of-hollywood.

[194] Peter X. Feng, "Asian American Media Studies and the Problem of Legibility," *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 3 (Spring 2017): 125–127.

stereotypes have weighed down the ability for Yeun's character to break ground in East-Asian American television representation. Chief among these issues is Glenn's masculinity. According to Ho, much of the breakdown of East-Asian American stereotypes in the 21st century is most capable of success when constructed around family dynamics or female representation.[195] The advancement of racialized interpretations of female characters may be arguably more acceptable because unequal opportunities in American society already restrict the potential for female East-Asian characters to challenge white male superiority. Family sagas are similarly encapsulated by the human need to protect the familial unit, which thus limits the amount of racial confrontation that can be realistically portrayed.

Androcentric narratives, on the other hand, pose the greatest potential threat to destabilizing white superiority in modern media and have been strictly European American-dominated to protect these narratives. The East-Asian male, and especially the virility of such characters, have been systematically undermined from the earliest renditions of the Yellow Peril stereotype in film and television. Media depictions of lustful Fu Manchu sorcerers obtaining European American female obedience through mind control transitioned to the mystical wisdom of the gender-neutral Charlie Chan. As East-Asian women satisfied their romantic and sexual needs through European American male lovers on the big screen, East-Asian male characters watched on with docility or were completely absent during the Exotic Conquest age. And finally, during the period of the Model Minority, social backwardness negated sexual opportunities for Asian male characters, who bided their time instead in service to their European American peers. In each of these stages, the roles of East-Asian male characters were circumscribed by the limits of the reigning stereotypical motif during their productions.

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[195] Helen K. Ho, "The Model Minority in the Zombie Apocalypse: Asian-American Manhood on AMC's The Walking Dead," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 49, no. 1 (February 19, 2016): 57–60.

Ho expressed concern that the earlier seasons *The Walking Dead* were equally representative of this trend, in which the series heavily relied on Glenn's Model Minority characteristics to justify the survival of his character in the post-apocalyptic environment. Glenn's team-work skills and willingness to sacrifice himself were both common traits of the Model Minority stereotype. The unique attribute of speed that he offers could also be likened to the skill sets more often attributed to prepubescent boys in popular media. Even when the character made American television history as the first Asian-American male to be depicted in a consensual and gratifying sexual relationship with a European American woman, Ho argued that his ability to do so was couched in the framework of a destroyed American post-racial order.[196] While the romantic liaison between Glenn and his lover delighted Asian American audiences for its symbolism in East-Asian male representation,[197] the relationship is punished on screen when she becomes pregnant with their child and he is brutally beaten to death shortly afterward.[198]

Other examples of contemporary East-Asian representation on media platforms is the highly popular *Crazy Rich Asian* (2018), the first of a three-part series based on the book trilogy by Chinese American author Kevin Kwan. A satirical Cinderella-esque romantic comedy about a Chinese American woman, Rachel Chu (played by Constance Wu), who is invited to attend a wedding with her Singaporean boyfriend. Before her arrival, she discovers that her boyfriend, Nick Young (played by Henry Golding), has not been entirely honest with her. Nick is actually the son of one of Singapore's wealthiest families and he is the subject of a great deal of public scrutiny. Once the couple arrives, Rachel finds her romantic relationship tested by Nick's disapproving mother and convincing activities of Nick's ex-girlfriend. Half-comedy and half-

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[196] Ho, "The Model Minority in the Zombie Apocalypse," 60-68.
[197] "BBQ." *Ugly Delicious*, February 23, 2018.
[198] Greg Nicotero, "The Day Will Come When You Won't Be," *The Walking Dead*, October 23, 2016.

family drama of intertwining narratives, reminiscent of *The Joy Luck Club*, Rachel's clumsy efforts to operate in a world of wealth and cut-throat social climbing while simultaneously winning the approval of her future in-laws ends in failure when a family secret of Rachel's mother is revealed. Nick's mother Eleanor (played by Michelle Yeoh) forbids the relationship to continue and Rachel returns to the home of friends in dismay. It is only with the surprise visit of Rachel's own mother, who reveals some of the great complexities of her own life as a young woman prior to immigrating to the United States. With her own personal familial issues resolved, Rachel confronts Eleanor, who later submits to the younger woman by giving her blessing that Rachel and Nick be married.[199]

Initial feedback for the film earned public and cinematic praise. John Chu and the producers were applauded for crafting the first big-budget picture to feature a largely East-Asian American cast since *The Joy Luck Club*. The box office success and accolades the film received led media coverage to imply that *Crazy Rich Asians* had opened a door long closed to East-Asian representation in Hollywood.[200] However, media scholars and members of the East-Asian American community were less willing to applaud the film. While still in production, East-Asian communities expressed displeasure with the casting of Henry Golding as the love interest[201] over concerns that his Malaysian-British biracial heritage demoted him to kind of white-washed acceptable Asian male romantic idol that had tarnished the casting of Nancy Kwan in *The World of Suzie Wong*. Other concerns were trained on the atmospheric backdrop of affluence, capitalist class, and public pressure to behave in socially acceptable ways as a hallmark of internalized

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[199] John M. Chu, *Crazy Rich Asians*. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2018.
[200] Wong, "How Crazy Rich Asians Is Changing the Face of Hollywood," https://www.denofgeek.com/us/movies/crazy-rich-asians/275815/how-crazy-rich-asians-is-changing-the-face-of-hollywood.
[201] *Ibid*.

Model Minority expectations. For example, the gender and Asian American scholar Grace Kyungwon Hong argued that between brand-name dropping and hackneyed character constructs, such as Rachel's middle-class background and employment as an assistant professor of economics, *Crazy Rich Asians* had dated itself awkwardly between various histories of East-Asian American racialization and stereotype.[202]

The film has also been criticized for its lack of awareness of contemporary issues relevant to the East-Asian American community. Even though Rachel is a second-generation Chinese

Criticisms lobbied at *Crazy Rich Asians* have revolved around how the picture made use of its opportunity to represent Asian and Asian American identity. The film has been accused of pandering to the anxieties of white viewership due to longshots of mansions and plot devices which emphasized wealth as the stepping stones to success, and therefore appealing to the myths of the model minority and the American Dream. The limited screen time granted to dark-skinned Asians, and the depiction of these characters in positions of service, also drew backlash.
Chu, John M. *Crazy Rich Asians*. Warner Bros. Pictures, 2018.

[202] Grace Kyungwon Hong, "Speculative Surplus American Racialization and the Neoliberal Shift," *Social Text* 36, no. 2 (2018): 111-114.

American, immigrant experience figures as little more than a background topic raised (and almost instantly resolved) only to move along the romantic plot line. None of the characters express interest or sympathy toward modern American immigration issues, where East-Asian immigrants have regained supremacy as the largest non-European population accepted at the border.[203] Entirely absent from the film are depictions of economic inequality, despite Rachel's more modest circumstances, as she easily obtains access to the luxury material objects necessary for inclusion in the lives of Singapore's rich and famous.[204] Such effortless fictitious social maneuvering belied ongoing debates among East-Asian American communities of the appropriate stance to take on contentious political issues, such as the debate over affirmative action or lawsuits recently raised against Harvard University over accusations of racial discrimination. Even more importantly, erasure of these topics isolated media depictions of East-Asian American experience in a vacuum free of all other ethnic minorities. *Crazy Rich Asian*'s atmosphere of an East-Asian luxurious utopia ultimately did a disservice to cooperative pan-ethnic Asian Americanism,[205] but it also implied that East-Asian American identity was more stable than it actually is.[206]

Conclusion

The history of East-Asian representation in popular film and television and the willful construction of a pan-ethnic racial identity is a legacy generations in the making. As a scholarly subject, however, media studies and East-Asian history each have a past no longer than a few

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[203] Ross Douthat, "亚裔美国人的时代," *纽约时报中文网 国际纵览*, September 4, 2018, https://cn.nytimes.com/opinion/20180904/asian-american-harvard-lawsuit/.
[204] Chu, *Crazy Rich Asians*.
[205] Rachel Ramirez, "It's a Cultural Moment For Asian Representation - As Long as You're Light-Skinned," *Huffington Post*, August 31, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/darker-skinned-asians-crazy-rich-asians_us_5b881151e4b0511db3d5b744.
[206] John Eligon, "平权运动下，亚裔美国人的挣扎与分裂," *纽约时报中文网 国际纵览*, June 20, 2018, https://cn.nytimes.com/education/20180620/affirmative-action-asian-americans/.

decades. The interconnected nature of these two topics remains largely undocumented in Asian American Studies, the failure of which underemphasizes the deep imprints that stereotypical renditions of East-Asian culture, intellect, gender, and morality had on the development of contemporary Asian American culture. Neither victims of America's entrenched history of systematic racism nor the rootless descendants of a racial identity manifested out of the idealism of the Civil Rights Movement in the shape of anti-war protest, pan-ethnic East-Asian identity is instead the progeny of intraracial ethnic conflict, colonial memory, national ethnocentrism and anxiety, and the creative imagination poured into an increasingly diverse public media forum.

Yellow Peril anxieties set the foundation for East-Asian racial identity in the Golden Age of Hollywood. *Black Roses, The Bitter Tea of General Yen,* and *The Good Earth* contended for audience validation of European American interpretations of East-Asian racial identity with East-Asian film production companies. Inaccuracies in depictions of Asian ethnicities concerned neither the film industry nor the general European American public.[207] Efforts to destabilize racist counter-narratives by East-Asian filmmakers, such as *The Curse of Quon Gwon*, fell on increasingly deaf ears as Europe succumbed to the chaos of WWII.

American culture became increasingly fractured through the WWII period via the eugenics movement, the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the Communist paranoia of the 1950s. Apprehension over chimeric subversives in the film industry justified the blacklisting of scores of actors and filmmakers, articulated simultaneously in popular media oriental symbols of the criminal and the Pervasively Foreign in the film noir genre. Productions such as *The Big Sleep* and the *Charlie Chan* media franchise captured the unease of post-war American culture. Only

[207] Lon Kurashige and Alice Yang Murray, eds., "MGM Studios Strategizes Advertisement for *The Painted Veil*, 1934." In *Major Problems in Asian American History: Documents and Essays*, 193–96, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003).

works like *The Steel Helmet* indicated the cooperative potential between Japanese and Korean ethnic minorities against the spread of communism in popular media, but changes to immigration legislation favoring certain ethnicities were reflective of the vacillating military relationships between the United States and the nations of the Far East off-screen.

Demonstrative efforts to combat anti-Japanese racism during the Japanese reconstructivist period spawn the Exotic Conquest stereotype, which minimized elements of stereotypical racism under the allure of tales of romance and adventure in idyllic island paradises. *The Teahouse of the August Moon* introduced American audiences to sexually forward geisha and *She Gods of Shark Reef* propagated imagery of virgin utopias inhabited with equally chaste native women. European American male audience members were free to pursue whichever of these delicacies they favored, with little concern for competition by an increasingly meek East-Asian male caricature. The same confidence in male European American superiority prompted military maneuvers in the Korean War under the guise of the defense of democracy against the spread of Chinese style communism. For a time, East-Asian communities remained largely complacent to these injustices, burdened by the traumatic memory of Japanese internment during WWII. Assimilation into popular American culture served instead as the recourse to shake of the oppressive memory of anti-Asian stereotypes[208] and was lauded by the singing and dancing all-Asian ensemble of *Flower Drum Song*.

The culture consciousness movements of the 1960s appealed to a youthful generation of East-Asian American minorities, who entered the second half of the 20th century "prepared to reject all stereotypes, preferring instead to find its own self-definition."[209] By 1969, Yuji Ichioka

[208] Nittle, "History of the Asian American Civil Rights Movement," https://www.thoughtco.com/asian-american-civil-rights-movement-history-2834596.
[209] Zia, *Asian American Dreams,* 47.

had given that identity a name, "Asian American," which reframed the pejorative term "Oriental" that had historically blanketed various ethnic minorities as one and the same. The collective quality of East-Asian American identity empowered this new generation to take the helm in racial identity by discarding the popular media narratives that divided ethnic minorities.[210] To facilitate this rewriting of historical memory, early independent East-Asian American filmmakers produced documentary pictures like *Manzanar* and *Wong Sinsaang* which transcended monoethnic categorizations.[211]

By the 1980s and 1990s, East-Asian American filmmaking matured along with historical post-structuralism and studies of culture and memory. Explorations of gender, age, and sexuality, from *The Wash* to *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Wedding Banquet*, rose to critical attention. These pictures competed against block-busters that profited on culturally appropriative martial arts pictures and a resurgence of racism as the American economy slackened. Acts of racist violence and questionable depictions of East-Asian identities both reinvigorated pan-ethnic collective protests. The future of American media had a more diverse audience to satisfy and a more vocal ethnic group that had banned together to disavow the way they had been characterized.

Film and television entertainment in the 21st century has resulted in triumphs and pitfalls for media depictions of East-Asian minorities, both by East-Asian filmmakers and those from outside the community. The self-reflexive productions of European American male heroism and sacrifice in the decade following the World Trade Center attacks on 9/11 proceeded a number of films that white-washed East-Asian characters. However, the limited successes garnered by productions caught up in white-washing controversies, such as *Ghost in the Shell*, can be

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[210] Ishizuka, *Serve the People* 62.
[211] Xing, *Asian America Through the Lens*, 33.

contrasted media that has garnered praise for extending the representation of East-Asian culture and for subverting pervasive narratives of anti-Asian stereotype. While works of these types, namely *The Walking Dead* television series and *Crazy Rich Asians* each have their own flaws, both represent a complex history of stereotypes, racial conflict and compromise, and collaborative productions of racial identity.

The future of East-Asian American identity in popular media and social construction will likely continue to change in response to social pressures, international and internal negotiations over social justice, and economic fluctuations. Scholars invested in the study of East-Asian American social identity and media representation may well find opportunities to expand research into subjects of ethnic diversity and other minority identities within the collective, such as queer Asian identities, that strain or strengthen pan-ethnic Asian American identity in a number of ways. The divide that formed between South/Near Asian ethnic minorities and East-Asian minorities could also be tracked to determine how the use of Asian American stereotypes influenced them. An increasingly globalized world and the proliferation of social media may represent a new kind of relationship between ethnic Asian American minorities and Asian populations on the other side of the globe that could alter the contemporary notion of the Asian racial collective that was immeasurable twenty years ago. Of any of the other numerous topics available to future research, the relevance of each is the result of generations of individual people, each with their own hopes, fears, and desires. The determination of each of these individuals to make their mark on the world around them is responsible for the data measured by this work.

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