

**Hollywood's Portrayals of Asian American Men: The Sick Man of America**

**T.K. Vang Sociology,**

**University Of Wisconsin Superior**

Dr. Chris Cherry

Texas A&M University

**ABSTRACT**

*The American audience of film theatre can be seen since the 20th century. A domicile, where it's a reflection of our society's ambiguous and unambiguous biases. Where sometimes the reel become real. This can be seen through Hollywood's insidious ways of their portrayal of Asian Men in their movies. These reinforcements of misconceptions have led to a manifestation of discrimination in real life.*

## **Introduction**

Just hearing the name, Long Duk Dong, a racist character created by Hollywood, puts a sinister smile on someone's face. Think of one of the latest Hollywood films you watched, the chances are that it is surrounded by negative Asian stereotypes and you probably did not notice it. This unawareness of racism/sexism against Asian men has become socially accepted as "normal," which no one wants to talk about and has now become symbolic of all Asian American men. This research is to analyze and inform people to make them comprehend these biases that lurk in front of them through the institution of American cinema.

Movies are one of the many forms of pedagogies to the social world and give choppy narrative knowledge on subjects of race, gender, sex and class. According to bell hooks, American author, feminist, social activist and professor at Berea College, states, "(movies) give the reimagined, reinvented version of the real" (hooks, 1996). By examining Hollywood's historical, present and future films and their portrayal of Asian American men, we can look at it from a sociological, social psychological lens and cultural criticism, and can begin to articulate how this construction has become the straightjacket for Asian American men. This straightjacket has been accepted as the norm through the performance of whiteness in the cinema. Asian actors have a "bamboo" ceiling that has pigeonholed them into stereotypical roles. Through examination of these films we also are able to break down biases and perceptions, and give a voice to the notion.

## **Historical**

Asian, Asian Pacific, Asian American are terms used collectively to reference to Asian and Pacific Islanders. The U.S. government provides a definition of Asian that includes the

people from East Asia (e.g., Japanese, Chinese, Korean), Southeast Asia (e.g., Thai, Hmong, Burmese) from Pacific Islander (e.g., Tongan, Samoan), South Asia (e.g., India, Nepali, Pakistan), West Asia (e.g., Iranian, Afghan) and from the Middle East (e.g., Jordanian, Palestinian).

According to the PBS documentary series “Ancestors in the Americas”, the first Asian settlers of the colonized USA were Chinese Filipino sailors who settled in Louisiana in the 1750s. Soon afterwards, in the 1840s, with the Slavery Abolition Act 1833 in Europe, slave makers soon found refuge in Asian countries such as India, China and the Philippines and started sending off slaves or coolies to islands in the Caribbean and parts of South America.

Around the time of the late 1840s and early 1850s, gold was being found on the west coast of America, mostly in California. In reaction to the findings, word spread to the other side of the world. Many Chinese and Japanese started immigrating to the West Coast of North America. The Transcontinental Railroad was also being built during the 1860s and the demand for cheap labor was high. Thus, an immense influx of laborers from China came into the USA. The discrimination these laborers faced was substantial. In addition to being lynched and being forced to perform vigorous hours of labor, the group was also discriminated against by the US government through the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The low cost of Asian laborers caused anti-Asian sentiments, which resulted in events like the 1885 Anti-Chinese Massacre in Rock Spring, Wyoming, where the white miners were not hired over the Asian miners. This massacre sent waves of Anti-Chinese sentiment across all of America. In 1941, the bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japan in the WWII led the USA to send Japanese Americans into internment camps. In 1959, the United States entered war with Vietnam. With civil rights movements on the rise, in 1968 at the Third World Strike at San Francisco State University Yuji

Ichioka coined the term Asian American to mean a collective social and political movement—came into full swing. 1979 of April 30, South Vietnam fell to communist North Vietnam. Thousands of refugees from Southeast Asia migrated to America to seek refuge from the monstrosity.

### **Model Minority**

“The little foreigner that could.” In 1966 an article “model minority” was written by William Petersen to demonstrate that even though the Japanese Americans went through the history of dehumanization they are still successful. The model minority outline which was what an “ideal” minority should be was and still used today against Latinos and African Americans who were protesting against discrimination. To counter that, white intellectuals, and political leaders established the model minority myth to get people of color to buy into the American dream, by working hard and quietly and not protesting in the streets. Again, this idea of model minority was not something that the Asian Americans created, but it was conceived by white elites for their public use. What they did not put was that most Asian families have more family members contributing to a house-income. The Asian Community is seen as a “model” for all other races. “If they can do it why can’t... Blacks, Native Americans, Latinos... etc ... do it?” (Chou, Feagin 2008).

According to the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Initiative, almost 30% of American Cambodians live in poverty, half of the female Hmong student’s drop out before high school graduation, and almost 40% of Hmong Americans live in poverty. By believing that Asian Americans are successful, politicians miss out on these facts and pin Asian Americans against other races, such as in the case of Bill O'Reilly stating “good minorities”. With preconceived notions from media that Asians are great at math, a lot of the time Asian students

are pigeon-holed by teachers to excel in math and science. Therefore becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that Asians are good at math, and always are quiet (speech classes and writing classes). AAPIs only filed about 2-3% of the total employment discrimination complaints received by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission against private employers. Social class and model minority privilege do not protect one from racialized violence (Chou and Feagin, 2008).

### **Performing Whiteness in Film**

GONG! Warning an Asian Face is about to enter the film screen. That must mean a foreigner! A Chinese foreigner! Asian as a foreigner is the most predominately onscreen stereotype of all character, both men and women. Dr. Fu Machu is a film creation of the stereotype of the Asian man as patriarchal, diabolical villain trying to torture all women, and women can only/need to be saved by the white male heroes. Another example is in the film *Shane* (1921), where evil Foo Chung tries to lure the good guy into a life of misery.

*Sixteen Candles* (1984) was a successful teen movie that went along with a plethora of teen films in the 1980s, mostly about trying to fit in, clothing style, love and sex. In the movie *Sixteen Candles*, with a mainly White cast, there is a character by the name of Long Duk Dong, who is a foreign exchange student. Every time his name was said a gong would sound went off. Asians are often seen on screen as someone who are nerds or geeks with great academic prowess, but no sense of social skill. This becomes an example of turning the model minority concept into a joke (Larson, 2006). Dong is often seen as the butt of the jokes. The beginning of the film, Dong is seen awkwardly on screen trying to hit on the lead female actress with a childish yet a quote remembered by many, "What's happenin' hot stuff?" In the ending of the film, Dong is seen to be the victim of violence by the main romantic lead, Jake, and even the elderly who "fragile" and weak are kicking Dong when he's on the ground. While being kicked

around on the ground, he heard speaking in broken English, "No more yanky my wanky... the Donger needs food!" Laughing at these kind of characters like the "Donger," White viewers have a sense of superiority over these characters, to combat against the academic and economic success of Asian Americans.

Just think of the last time you saw a Hollywood movie where the lead romantic character is of Asian descent. As Asian American men are dehumanized sexually, so the Asian American women are made sexually available, all of which serves to establish White male supremacy over both Asian American men and women. In films where there are interracial romances, the Asian American women are always seen raped and abused by the Asian men and saved only by the White man in "shining armor" to provide her with redemption and opportunity. Clear examples of these tropes may be seen in *Year of The Dragon* (1985), *Come See Paradise* (1990), and *Thousand Pieces of Gold* (1991). *Year of The Dragon* is a clear example of the White savior role. The main character is a White veteran man, who with the help of his sidekick and romantic relationship with an Asian woman, is able to fight off crime. The woman is raped by the Asian man of her community, which serves as her justification for her escape from that group into that of the White protagonist. The White man kills the evil Asian man gangbanger and gets the girl. Asian American actor Cary-Hiroiyuki Tagawa said, "In Hollywood . . . we had a choice of playing wimpy businessmen or evil bad guys. The worst thing I can do is play a bad guy and be a wimpy bad guy, which is what I grew up with. And my intention was, if I'm going to choose between wimpy businessman or playing a bad guy, I'm going to play a bad guy. Because . . . I want kids to grow up to know that Asian men got [guts]." (Adachi, 2006)

Supplementary to the nerds and geeks, there is also the stereotype for Asian men as subservient, unattractive asexual helpers (Larson, 2006). Asian men are also stereotypically

portrayed either as asexual, sexually inferior or effeminate according to western notions of sexuality and never sexually desirable to females. In the movie *Fargo* (1992) an Asian man is cast as being lonely and unattractive and resorting to deceit or to breaking social protocol in his attempt to get a Caucasian woman in his bed. Mr. Yunioshi (played by Mickey Rooney) in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961), is a character with big buck teeth and broken English.

“O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?

Deny thy father and refuse thy name;

Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,

And I'll no longer be a Capulet” (Shakespeare, trans. 2005, 2.2.33-35).

In the more recent film of classic remake of *Romeo and Juliet*, called “*Romeo Must Die*” (Bartkowiak, 2000), Romeo is played by International Martial Arts Actor, Jet Li, and Juliet is played by Aaliyah. A widely well-known story of two lovers from different clans who fall in love, even this well-known story has the hero “Romeo” hugging “Juliet” at the end of the film, instead of a kiss. According to documentary *The Slanted Screen* (Adachi, 2006), Li and Aaliyah were supposed to have an ending kiss, but was the pre-screening for the film was with an urban audience and that ending kiss scene was meet with ridicule by the audience.

Reel to real, this imagery has gone beyond the screens. Quartz' (a dating application) data are based on a series of yes or no questions about who users are interested in, as well as response rates between users, once notified of a potential suitor. The data show that white men and Asian women receive the most interest, whereas Black men and women receive the least amount of interest. The results with as the highest repose was for Asian women, because society sexualizes Asian women, while African American on both sexes received the least response



from all race, except themselves are devalued. Even when the occurrence of a relationship between an Asian man and another women of a different race, the women is often ridiculed or asked about her man's masculinity. A clear example would be that of present young Australian Musician, who took the nation by surprise with her single "Royals", which has won two Grammy awards, Ella Marija Lani Yelich-O'Conno, who goes by her stage name as Lorde. The Paparazzi have taken photos of Miss Lorde and her boyfriend who is of Asian descent and have plastered it all over the internet. With that being said, came the Twitter and Facebook comments. Examples of some tweets were: Is he a math nerd or something?; if lorde's [sic] boyfriend and her ching chong boyfriend can get all loveydovey [sic] why cant I [sic]?; Lorde and her boyfriend makes me uncomfortable.; lorde's [sic] boyfriend looks like the chinese [sic] exchange student from sixteen candles (Takeda, 2013). Had it been a white man with an Asian women, it is likely that there would not have been this sort of disparagement.

Literally taking Hollywood by sheer will power was legendary Hong Kong American martial artist and actor, Lee Jun-fan or widely known as Bruce Lee. Bruce Lee was the pride of Asian American men. He possessed all the traits of hegemonic masculinity of strength and power (Shimizu, 2012). In his first Hollywood film, *Enter the Dragon* (Clouse, 1973) Lee was the first Asian American actor to have brute star power. Not only did Lee act in the film, he also choreographed the fight scenes, which were the main attraction. Bruce Lee plays a character in the film by the name of Lee. Lee is a martial arts master who is told by his superiors to join a martial arts conference on an island hosted by an assumed criminal by the name of Dr. Han. On the way to the island on a ship, there are many other martial artists from their own perspective nations. Lee befriends an African American man named Williams and a Caucasian American named Roper. Getting to the island after the large group of martial arts are greeted by Dr. Han,

Lee warms up in his room for his martial arts match. The man Lee faces is one of Dr. Han's bullies, who in the past tried to rape Lee's sister, who completed suicide instead of being raped by the bullies. Swiftly and fluidly, Lee take down the goon in his match with ferocity of revenge anybody would feel for the murder of a loved one. After the tiresome matches, the martial artists are offered up women who are sex trafficked by Dr. Han. Bruce Lee's character does not participate in the sexual traffic of women instead helps assist one of the women who is working as a spy. The spy informs Lee of the operation happening. Lee still maintains sexuality and demonstrates it through the look into her eyes. As Lee is about to take off outside a window, he is seen with a look of a seductive gaze at the spy before venturing off, finding out the drugs inside Dr. Hans lair and exposing them.

Even as great as Bruce Lee was, before his films he was stuck with being a sidekick in a TV series called *Green Hornet* (1966). Lee was to try out for a television series called *Kung Fu* (1972-75) but was rejected because he looked too "Asian" despite being a quarter Caucasian. The role instead went to David Carradine, who is not even Asian, but plays a character who is "half" Asian (Fuller, 2010). Only after *Enter the Dragon* did people really look into Lee's previous films (which were all made in China), which all contain this sense of pride and hegemonic masculinity for Asian men.

### **Racebending**

"Asian-American actors have never been treated as full-time actors. We're always hired as part-timers. That is, producers call us when they need us for only race-specific roles. If a part was seen as too 'demanding,' that part often went to a non-Asian." – Mako Iwamatsu

Most of the time, Asian Americans cannot even play themselves anymore. Racebending is a term that refers to the creator changing the ethnicity of the character, and is mostly used to deny jobs to actors of color. If the main character is of Asian descent, for example, the role does not get played by an Asian actor. Instead it goes to a white actor. A role that resonates throughout racebending is the character Charlie Chan, nevertheless not a Hollywood film, but is a show by the name and the character who is a detective named Charlie Chan. Chan was always played by white men who wore eye prosthetics to make them appear Asian. This character's cleverness was always associated with this race, speaking in broken English, and spouting neo-Confucian quotes. Chan was often seem asexual even though he had family of his own, namely "Number 1" or "Number 2" son as an assistant (Foster, 2003). Charlie's sons were usually the butt of the jokes, as they were always played by genuine Asians. Although Chan is the main character in the ongoing drama series, he is seen as no sexual threat to the white hero in each plot episode.

More recent films that have done racebending include popular Marvel Comic Films, *Iron Man Three*, made in 2013. The main villain, the Mandarin, who is supposed to be of Asian descent is played by a white actor. *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005), famous American cartoon series in an Asian-influenced world with diverse characters on TV was to be made into a live action film. The series main characters in the TV show are Aang, a young Asian boy and his two friends, Katara (love interest) who is of Inuit descent, and Sokka, a young teen boy of Inuit descent. With the diverse background these characters have, the actors who play them in the live action called *The Last Airbender* (2010), were all White, while the villains were played by actors of color. One of the actors who played the leading hero is quoted saying, "I think I need a tan."

Not only is racebending in recent films, but future incoming films. Yet again, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (2014), the role of Shredder (Japanese descent), the infamous villain Shredder is given to a White actor who instead of an Asian American actor. *Akira* (1988) a notorious animation cult-film, widely considered a landmark of Japanese animation is said to be made into a live action series. Being considered playing the main character of Tetsuo Shima and Shotaro Kaneda are actors Robert Pattinson, Andrew Garfield, James McAvoy, Garrett Hedlund, Michael Fassbender, and Justin Timberlake who are all Caucasian (Jagernauth , 2011).

### **Double Consciousness**

“My nickname was Long Duk Dong in High school because of that character... Every Asian guy that ever went to an American schools nickname was Long Duk Dong because of that character. That means, that you’re not going to get any girls.” – Comedian, Bobby Lee (Adachi, 2006).

One of the founding fathers on the subject of Race and Ethnicity is sociologist, W.E.B DuBois, who coined the term Double Consciousness. Double consciousness is “... a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness...” (DuBois, 1994, p.3) That “other” as DuBois states, is of the dominant group. According to Nielsen statistics, the average American over the age of 2 spends more than 34 hours a week watching live television (Hinckley, 2012). Most of the time kids do not get see actors or people like themselves, which therefore becomes disempowering, by thinking that Asians are not important. Whenever kids and teens did see Asians on screen, it is almost always the stereotypical portrayals. Asian kids can see this and interpret this in a couple ways. They can reject their own culture (self-hate), intentionally by not hanging out with other

Asian American kids, therefore falling prey into White society's model minority by trying to be "white" and perpetuating it. Some fight against the stereotypes that are portrayed. While kids of other race have a void but it's filled to them already by such stereotypes they see on screen.

Japanese American actor James Shigeta, the star of "Flower Drum Song (1961)," recalls a movie musical producer telling him, "If you were white, you'd be a hell of a big star." By taking a look at the top grossing film of each year in America, from 2005-2012, they all have one thing in common: a leading hero who is of Caucasian descent.

According to survey data released in 2011 by the US Justice Department and Education Department, more than half of Asian American students have faced bullying in school (Uchida, 2012). Being an Asian American man myself and living in a city that is not as diverse, I have been seen as an outsider, and always thought of how they looked at me. The only movie star I had to admire was Bruce Lee, and if I wanted to have an Asian actor as a lead, I would have to watch a movie from Asia, which I should not have to because of how diverse America is. I have heard it almost all the stereotype for Asian males all. Examples: "do you speak ching Chong," to "go back to China," or "do all Asians eat dogs?" to women asking me if I REALLY have a small penis. So to say that these stereotypes do not affect us is very inaccurate. During my first year in college, women would often ask me if I only go out with Asian women or if I had any interest in women at all, as if I were asexual. All of these experiences made me really think of how they got these preconceived notions.

### **Social Activism**

"Who will cry for the little boy?

Lost and all alone.

Who will cry for the little boy?

Abandoned without his own?

Who will cry for the little boy?

He cried himself to sleep.

Who will cry for the little boy?

He never had for keeps.

Who will cry for the little boy?

He walked the burning sand

Who will cry for the little boy?

The boy inside the man.

Who will cry for the little boy?

Who knows well hurt and pain

Who will cry for the little boy?

He died again and again.

Who will cry for the little boy?

A good boy he tried to be

Who will cry for the little boy?

Who cries inside of me." - Antwone Fisher

By consenting to discussions of Hollywood's insidious portrayal of Asian men sanctions for increased zest, greater knowledge, an increase sense of self-worth, and change. By being silent people are unsure to response to these kinds of racial issues. A young Asian boy who remain silent about these issues/stereotypes of their own experiences may lead to self-blame, and self-doubt (Tatum, 1997).

Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA) is the first non-profit organization formed in 1992 to observe all aspects of media, and to advocate positively balanced portrayal of Asian Americans. Some of MANAA's Key Milestones are: MANAA questioned the film *Falling Down* (1993) which had to have diverse characters, which in turn required Joel Schumacher to produce a public service announcement that he was in need of actors of color. In 2003, MANAA organized a protest against "Banzai" a TV show aired by Fox. Guy Aoki, co-founder of the group, told *BBC News*. "This is like an Asian minstrel show. Can you imagine the black version of Banzai." MANAA, together with activists across the country, persuaded advertisers to pull their ads. The show was soon removed from Fox.

Racebending.com, is a social activist group that is currently working against the rise of racebending. They have done protests against *The Last Airbender* (2010), although to their dismay the film went on. The activists did, however, bring forth the community against a rise of social inequality among Asian American representation by Hollywood. Racebending.com has also done great job using social media as a way to distribute information and awareness of future and current films with racist or racialized depictions of Asian stereotypes. They also have a petition circulating so the whitewashed live action film *Akira* does not happen. Racebending.com has also written letters to Warner Brothers inviting the producers to reflect on their decisions not to cast Asian actors.

### **Diversity in the Films**

We have seen a surge of young talented Asian American actors and directors in the realm of YouTube. YouTube allows them to be 1) be rebellious and creative; 2) listen to those who have gone before and are breaking ground; and 3) collectively work to make the changes. Such channels like the Wong Fu Productions, Fung Brothers, JustKiddingFilms, Timothy DeLaGhetto, KevJumba, NigaHiga, and Freddie Wong.

Directors have stood up and created roles for actors. Justin Lin, an Asian American director, who directed a multiple series of the *Fast and Furious* fought long and hard for a role he created specifically for an Asian American actor, who Sung Kang landed the role of Han in the series. One of Lin's first movies *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002) was filmed with all Asian American actors, which was revolutionary and radical at that time. *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004) directed by Danny Leiner, features two Asian American men who decide to go on adventure to go to chain restaurant White Castle, but after smoking cannabis they lose their way to the restaurant and experience misfortunes along the way. Both characters are exposed to stereotypes in the film, but reject and go beyond them, even to the extent that the lead actor got to kiss the girl! To conclude, these films were not only a positive response from Asian Americans, but to all racial audiences.

### **Conclusion**

Asian Americans are still depicted by Hollywood as foreigners. Racial slurs towards Asian Americans are still seen as the norm. Asian American males have yet to hit the stage much outside of Kung Fu or martial arts.



But, Hollywood. We are the not sick man of America, as you say we are. We are not to be subjugated to your white racial framing (Chou and Feagin, 2008). You have offended our community, and you have offended our culture. We are not asking to have all lead characters of Hollywood be Asian American, which will be dull and mind-numbing. We are just asking for equal representation and to take away those stereotypes. Actors before us, from sex symbol Sessue Hayakawa, Mako, heart-throb James Shingeta, Cary-Hiroyuki Tagawa, Tzi Ma, Jason Scott Lee, and legendary Bruce Lee, have paved the way for future generations. The beautiful and honest depictions of Asian Americans are emerging. We have taken small strides away from the stereotypical yellowface, but have yet to more to endure. Together with collective efforts and hopes, we will make it onto films, change is possible.

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