IS CHARLIE CHAN REALLY DEAD?
THE EVOLUTION OF ASIAN AMERICAN CHARACTERS AND IMAGES IN AMERICAN MAINSTREAM MEDIA

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Let me begin with some interesting quotations describing the first and most popular stereotypical figure in Asian American fiction - Detective Sergeant Charlie Chan of the Honolulu Police: “A modest detective”(9); “He’s not very impressive to look at, but ...(8); “He flies so low that he skims the daisies”(8); “He has the patience of the East, you know”(8) “an unimpressive little man with a bulging waistband and a very earnest expression on his chubby face”(13); a disciple of the famous philosopher - Old Man in China who said, “The fool questions others, the wise man questions himself”; he sat “huddled up on his chair like some fat, oblivious Buddha.”(240). When it comes to the display of wit and intelligence, this apparently shy detective become rather street-savvy and even preaches a lot of his own home grown philosophy. He remains in San Francisco because he wants to “add (his) minute brain power to (Scotland Yard’s) famous capacity in the same line”(75); “Coarse food to eat, water to drink, the bended arm for a pillow - that is an old definition of happiness in my own country”(18); “Chinese funny people. They say no, no is what they mean. They say yes and they are glued to the same.”(26); “Maybe I am stupid Chinese from tiny island. I know nothing. But if this was my case…. ”(57) “Surprise is not in the lexicon of the race” (105); “My race has old saying, Captain. Muddy water, unwisely stirred grows darker still. Left alone, it clears itself.”(97-98); “You land people - I observe what home is to you. An unprivate apartment, a pigeonhole to dive into when the dance, the automobile ride is ended. We Chinese are different. Love, marriage, home, still we cling to unfashionable things like that. Home is a sanctuary into which we retire, father is high priest, the altar fire burns bright.(90).; “That you once listened to a Chinaman is, after all, no lasting disgrace.”(252)

These random quotes are all taken from a single book entitled *Behind That Curtain,*¹ by Earl Derr Biggers published in New York in 1928 by the Reader’s League of America. What is more significant is the fact that the author was not a Chinaman, but a
male WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant) and interestingly, the title page also states that “This Special Edition is Published Especially for The American Red Cross.” So, exotic locations with exotic Asian characters were created by Biggers with the primary aim of providing some kind of relaxation to the Red Cross Volunteers at the end of a long and tiresome day’s work. His Charlie Chan bequeathed great influential images of ‘bad’ and ‘good’ Chinese along with Sax Rohmer’s Fu Manchu. A brief survey of American literature, both serious and popular, for the last century and half, shows that ‘Orientals’ or ‘Asian Americans’ were mostly characterized in broad stereotypes as alien ‘Others’, either as sinister villains, dragon ladies, brute hoardes, helpless heathens, comical servants, loyal sidekicks, coolies, cooks, launderers, Suzy Wongs, Charlie Chans, or wily asexual detectives. The myth of the ‘erotic Oriental’ and her objectification as sexual mannequin continued to haunt the portrayal of Asian women - from Ah Choi [“the girl in the green silk pantaloons’] to Suzie Wong to sultry Indian princesses of the kind depicted in the movie Far Pavilions. With the proliferation of a significant amount of Asian American writing in the last three decades, this world view has undergone a considerable change. Social historians and literary critics alike have emphasised how with the emergence of cultural pluralism in America and the production of literature by hyphenated ethnic groups, Asian Americans have come a long way from being depicted as “model minorities”. They propose that with Charlie Chan, Fu Manchu and Suzie Wong dead, characterization in literature no longer caters to the age old stereotypes which primarily represented the white man’s point of view. “The question need no longer be ‘either/or’”, says Elaine Kim in her introduction to an anthology of contemporary Asian American fiction, entitled Charlie Chan is Dead, and she goes on to explain the change in perspective thus:

Instead of “model minorities,” we find human beings with rich and complex pasts and brave often flamboyant dreams of the future. There are dysfunctional families that bear no resemblance to the Charlie Chan version of “Chinese family values,” tragic stories of suicide, incest, child abuse, as well as bittersweet songs about ageing, love and death. (xiii)

Kim also aptly explains the reason for this shift in the art of characterization:
Charlie Chan is indeed dead, never to be revived. Gone for good his yellow-face asexual bulk, his fortune-cookie English, his stereotypical Orientalist version of “the (Confucian) Chinese family,” challenged by an array of characters, some hip and articulate, some brooding and sexy, some insolent and others innocent, but all as unexpected as a Korean American who writes in French, a Chinese-Panamanian-German who longs too late to know her father, a mean Japanese-American grandmother, a Chinese-American flame-diver, or a teenaged Filipino American male prostitute. Thus most critics agree that the “fresh-off-the-boat” image of Asian Americans has been successfully done away with in literature and the fresh ethnic voices are clearly being heard above the noisy din.

While this new perspective rejoices the reader, writer and critic of Asian American literature alike, a survey of American mainstream media shows that this is not always true. Right from the beginning of Hollywood cinema where, like the Blacks, Asian Americans were always depicted in stereotypical roles, to the present day when three major film festivals are held in the United States each year, the scenario has not changed radically. This paper therefore proposes to examine whether the stereotypes of the Chink, the coolies, cooks, launderers - all alien ‘Others’ - still exist in American mainstream media or whether they have been done away with after the emergence of a whole new brand of Asian American directors who could successfully do away with the myth of the Asian stereotypes.

“He’s handsome. He’s tough. He’s worth millions. He’s Asian American (Learn his secrets inside.)” Thus begins a mailer advertising Transpacific Magazine, directed at a young and supposedly very mobile new class of Asian Americans. Next to these words, Russell Wong appears, elegantly dressed in a tuxedo. He is meant to represent the minority that made it big, who has arrived as a powerful force in American and global life. Yet the secrets that lie behind Russell Wong are not his alone. If he represents the success of Asian men in becoming mainstream in America, he also represents their failures and their history. The history of Asian American men in mainstream media is
largely found in the visual medium of the motion picture. Asian Americans can be found in the very first black and while silent shorts of the late nineteenth century and in films of every successive decade. Sometimes these characters were more popular, sometimes less. Sometimes they had large roles, sometimes the most minute. Sometimes they were played by actual Asians and sometimes by Whites in yellowface. But whatever the means, Hollywood has consistently produced some version of Asian and Asian American men to present to the American public.

Hollywood however, has often failed to make a distinction between Asian Americans and Asians. Therefore, attitudes towards Asian American men have been heavily influenced by portrayals of Asian men. As Eugene Franklin Wong puts it, “the hand-me-down potential of stereotypes, especially negative ones, can be activated by the presentation of motion pictures that were made years earlier.”

Though several critics have also noted two distinct types of representations of Asian men in American movies, iconized by the fictional characters of Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan, only a few of them have attempted to differentiate between portrayals of Asian Americans and Asians. This is because the films rarely differentiate. The fact is that Charlie Chan may have been the very first well-known Asian American man. This is not how the movies present him, however. According to the films, he is a “Chinese detective” who happens to speak perfect English, dresses in suits, lives in Hawaii and has Americanized children. These things merely make him an acceptable hero, but did not make him into an American or even a “Chinese American detective.” Over twenty five Charlie Chan movies were made during the 1930’s and 40’s creating a genre all their own. Chan is the most famous of the Asian male detective, yet he is practically sexless. An intellectual man, he never shows an emotion, let alone lust. Fu Manchu, on the other hand, epitomized the threatening foreigner. Although very different, these two characters have been the archetypes for representations of both Asian and Asian American men.

The first Asians to come to the US in significant numbers were Chinese labourers. Correspondingly, the first images of Asians to appear in the mainstream media were of
those men. “When Asian immigrants appeared in newspapers and magazines in the 1900’s, they were depicted with slanted eyes, buck teeth and yellow skin.” Perhaps these were also the first images of Asian American men. The emphasis at the time was clearly what was foreign about them, however, and not on what they may have assimilated. The anti-Asian sentiment, fuelled by several immigration exclusion acts, probably influenced these portrayals. “Culturally biased perceptions of the Chinese as uniquely non-western in dress, language, religion, customs, and eating habits determined that the Chinese were inferior.”

The early presence and size of the Chinese population has been reflected in the fact that of Asian countries, China has been shown in feature films by far the most frequently, with Japan rapidly catching up. To the extent that representations of Asians were representations of Chinese, supposedly general characteristics of Asians drew upon stereotypes of the Chinese. And Anti-Chinese bias translated into anti-Asian bias. Rather than acknowledging the differences between Asian cultures, American versions of Asians often borrowed haphazardly from all cultures, so much so that all of the dozens of Asian and Pacific Island cultures got lumped together into one common homogeneous identity. One early example can be cited from D.W.Griffith’s 1919 film Broken Blossoms where the Chinese character commits hara-kiri and Buddhism is randomly associated to all Asians. Boris Karloff, in the title role of Fu Manchu in The Mask of Fu Manchu (1932) offers Karen Morley as a blood sacrifice. In the end, the image of both the Chinese and Japanese in the media depended more on political factors among the dominant Caucasian population of the United States than upon the characteristic behaviour or attitudes of either immigrant group.

The early Chinese labourers entered American mainstream media as coolies. They could be easily recognized in magazines and newspapers of the day by their queues, coolie caps, slippers and jackets, often with braiding or buttons. Long after the coolie disappeared in reality, these exotic items implied a connection to this stereotype that Asian men are economically inferior, strange eunuchs who speak with an accent and although outwardly submissive, may not be trustworthy. Usually small in stature, the
coolie was early on given the particular tasks of cooking and cleaning too. To a large extent, Asians found themselves in these positions because these were the ones allowed them. Trapped in real life, men of Asian origin also became trapped in the fantasy world of Tinseltown. One of the first attempts at film comedy went by two names, “Robetta and Doreto” or “Chinese Laundry Scene” (1894). This short film stars the Chinaman Hop Lee who employs tremendous ingenuity and dexterity to elude the Irish policeman who chases him. In this and other films of the first few decades of movie making the Chinese were presented mainly to provide comic relief and to establish local colour. Around the 1930s, in movies like Song of Kong (1933), San Francisco (1936), The Painted Veil (1934), another version of the coolie appeared. From laundry man to domestic, the Asian man became more specifically a manservant, tending to the personal services of a White man. What interests us is the fact that while these three films are set in places as far apart as China, America and the make-believe Skull Island, the Asian character in them does not change.

The coolie laundry man stereotype of the Asian domestic servant seen right from the beginning of cinematographic history and continuing in several variations down the decades can be found on television as late as the 1970s. He is Hop Sing from Bonanza-the Western series that dominated the Sunday-night ratings for over a decade. As Hop Sing, Victor Sen Yung wears coolie attire and speaks in a high-pitched voice with an accent. Like a harried housewife, he literally runs and hops around, cooking, cleaning, completing all domestic errands. More than just a good servant, Hop Sing’s Asian eccentricities serve to amuse the Cartwrights, their guests and supposedly the audience. His complaints cannot be taken seriously because he is not taken seriously proving the fact that these characters were not presented as Asian Americans -- at best they were seen as resident aliens. However, there is a second type of coolie in Bonanza. Those who speak more English seem to have a more ‘American’ attitude, speaking casually to their bosses. There seems to be some recognition that Asians were assimilating, although they were still relegated to being servants.
In the few films of the first half of this century in which there was an Asian lead, it usually went to a White actor. This was especially true if the character was sympathetic, such as in *Broken Blossoms* and *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933). It is seen that major roles or characters have been reserved for the whites and minor roles or characters were often open to, but not necessarily reserved for the Asian actors.\(^7\) The practice of yellowface continued for several decades, including *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* with Mickey Rooney and *A Majority of One* with Alec Guinness in the yellowface roles as late as 1961. Films with Chinese characters played by Whites allowed audiences to experience exotic locales and vicarious thrills while minimizing the threats involved. Yellowface is an example of “Hollywood orientalism (which) could bring once-forbidden pleasures to the mass movie audience as long as actual Asians were kept out.”\(^8\) Sometimes, the Asian man also took the Madame Butterfly role of self-sacrifice and paid the penalty for interracial love. Wong associates the assignation of suicide to Asians as “a racist justification for white devaluation of Asian life.”\(^29\)

It must be mentioned at this juncture that by the 1930s, the Asian manservant of the movies had begun to change his Eastern clothing for Western. Based on a derogatory term for Japanese houseboys, this version of domestic servant was known as Charlie. Historically, then second wave of Asian immigrants to America was indeed largely young Japanese men who did domestic work while furthering their education. Both the coolie and the Charlie versions of the servant continued to make their appearances well into this century. American attitudes were reflected in the 1942 flick, *Across the Pacific*, in which Humphrey Bogart comments that the “Japanese make great servants.” That little has been written about the Charlie character in movies can be ascribed to the fact that by the simple act of donning a suit, the Asian man may as well have assumed a cloak of invisibility. At least as a coolie, his character had some more notability, if only for comic or exotic purposes. The Western suit implies that he has been assimilated as a servant, perhaps domesticated. In the MGM musical *Easter Parade* (1948), Fred Astaire has an Asian manservant in full formal attire. He also has the accent, small stature and submissive cheeriness we have come to recognize in Asian man servants. He changes Mr.
Hughes’s (Astaire’s) coat and answers the door to receive guests. In *Torch Song* (1953), which has an infamous performance by Joan Crawford in blackface, we have a character called Tai. This houseboy is short, balding, wears a white coat and says “I’m sorry” with an accent so many times that his boss tells him to stop. In response to that order, he apologizes again, of course and quotes Confucius. The fact that these portrayals are so easily forgettable is of great importance. Charlie is a great servant, assimilated just enough to wear Western clothes and speak English. He is probably an Asian American. However his character provides little or no basis for a lead character or a romantic one. Wong blames the lack of Asian lead roles on a “racialist belief that Asians (especially Asian males) lack desirable human qualities, which are viewed as marketable commodities by white executives.”(256)

The Charlie stereotype complements the better known geisha stereotype created for Asian women. Regarding the geisha, Renee Tajima writes, “these Oriental flowers are utterly feminine, delicate and welcome respites from their often loud, independent American counterparts.” Together the geisha and Charlie create a feminized, domestic Asia that cares for and soothes the White man. They are fantasies of submission, passivity and loyalty. With their Oriental affectations, which make them distant and exotic, the Asian face has rarely been free of associations with strange affections and this allows the individuality of these characters to be largely disregarded. They become more an appendage to Whiteness than people in their own right. In the film *My Geisha* (1962), an American man praises Japanese women because instead of suing for alimony like American women, they commit suicide by “jump(ing) into volcanoes.” It is interesting to note here that unlike Charlie, the geisha is often glorified and often held up as an example which white women should follow. This is because she is endowed with acceptable sexuality and therefore have them in romantic lead roles. According to a critic, the geisha became such a popular character that “it appeared as if the geisha was Hollywood’s chief emblem of post-war reconciliation.” Several examples of films which star geishas include various versions of the Madame Butterfly story - *My Geisha* with Yoko Tani, *Sayonara* (1957) with Miiko Tara and *Teahouse of the August Moon*
Together they create a genre of films in which the submissive Asian woman plays a prominent part. Many specifically compare Asian and White women, only to find the White women lacking. *Sayonara* for example holds Katsumi up as a paragon of female virtue. Later, she is shown performing her domestic tasks, cooking, serving guests, bathing her husband, cheerfully and quietly.

As a direct descendant of the geisha, the submissive Asian woman thus became an icon. Recent films like Oliver Stone’s *Heaven and Earth* (1993) both contain and deny the misconceptions about Asian women. On the one hand, the American GI says things like “my first wife taught me a real lesson” and “I need a good Oriental woman,” implying that Asian women are somehow more desirable than white women. But if he had in mind a submissive wife in his Vietnamese bride, he turns out to be mistaken as she Americanizes in the States. Ultimately, she does sue for alimony instead of committing suicide the way the American man fantasized in *My Geisha*. The stereotypes do not disappear as the foundation of representations, but they do become ironized and played upon. Rarely can they be taken at face value anymore. Unlike the Charlie character, the geisha in all her variation was seen by the white man to be a role model for White women and thus were happy to either glorify or exploit her image.

The other reigning stereotype of the Asian woman is the dragon lady. Anna May Wong gave her version in several films including *A Study in Scarlet* (1933). This popular stereotype continues to affect portrayals of Asian American women. An episode of *Saturday Night Live* (1995) had a sketch based on Connie Chung which showed Chung purposefully tricking Newt Gingrich’s mother, putting words into her mouth, misquoting her and finally forcing her to lie at gunpoint. “Connie Chung is evil,” Newt tells his mother. The dragon lady stereotype has specific consequences for Asian men as well. It helps emasculate them. In several films, the Asian woman is presented as the ringleader, usually of a criminal group. In addition to *The Black Widow* (1947 serial), these include Luana Walters as Sonya Rokoff in *Shadow of Chinatown* (1936), Carmel Myers as madame Ying Su in *Chinatown After Dark* (1931), and Beatrice Lille as white slaver Mrs. Meers in *Thoroughly Modern Millie*. Interestingly, all these films also have Asian
men play coolie characters subordinate to these women. However, the ladies are usually the stars and visual centres, not the men who are alluded to but may never appear at all. Like the submissive geisha, the dragon lady also has a penchant for White men. Usually dressed in tight silk dresses, bodies on display, she is terribly sexy but can also be sly, cruel and continually popular. In James Bond films, “Oriental women, always potentially treacherous, must be watched with especial care.” The question therefore remains whether there is an invisible equation that subtracts power from Asian men to the extent that Asian women are shown in positions of authority.

Another area where the Asians were stereotyped was in the concept of Americanized Asians. Several films from the 1960s were particularly explicit in portraying a young generation of Asians both in America and the East whose main interests are the same as any American teenager. In the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical Flower Drum Song (1961) almost the entire cast is Asian but there is at the same time no evidence that the Chinese people and the White people live and work together. The movie also calls upon the stereotype of illegal immigrants and makes the point that there are Asians who are more American than Chinese. Another aspect of the yellow peril is that overwhelming masses of yellow people are either coming into America, or are already there, or are ready to attack the Americans in Asia. Movies which present hordes of Asians vary from fantasies like Lost Horizon (1937) to war films like The Killing Fields to the James Bond genre in You Only Live Twice to the “memorable Asian masses” in Apocalypse Now (1979). The endless list also includes Shanghai Express, (1932) The Bitter Tea of General Yen, The Thief of Baghdad, The Painted Veil and The World of Suzie Wong. (1960) In fact, most films which highlight Asia at all will have at least one scene which pans a sea of Asian faces. Sometimes it is a sea of peasants and sometimes a sea of soldiers, but the message is clear - there is a lot of them. The numbers also means that probably life is cheap.

With the World War II, America found in the Japanese a way to combine their largely irrational fear of people of colour with a military fear. Pearl Harbour enabled
Hollywood to revive all the old ‘Yellow peril’ characteristics. Caricatures of the Japanese can even be found in cartoon of the day. Warner Brothers’ *Looney Tunes* created a duck version of the Jap who has glasses, buck teeth and cries ‘oh sorry, sorry, sorry’ (with slurred ‘r’s). They also created *Tokio Jokio* and *Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips*. In fact, the bucktoothed Japanese became a standard cartoon figure. Max Fleisher created a Popeye the Sailor cartoon entitled *You’re a Sap, Mr. Jap* which is a song Popeye sings over and over. This cartoon shows the Japanese deceiving our hero causing Popeye to cry out righteously “double-crossing Japanese”. Even the Chinese got their chance to be ridiculed. This is reflected in the continuing popularity of Chinatown as a setting for crime and Chinese mafia as villains. Chinatown is also caught in two worlds, created by its conflicting themes. “Chinatown fulfils a commercial hunger for a domesticated otherness that can represent both the fulfilment of the American myth of the melting pot and play with the dangers of the exotic.”

Before concluding this random survey, I would also like to emphasise the point I made at the beginning that unlike in literature, American mainstream media has not been able to do away with its stereotypical images of Asians and Asian Americans even today. Thus, the ‘typical’ Asian workers portrayed as coolies at the turn of the century are in today’s media mirrored in one-dimensional Chinese laundry men, Japanese gardeners and Filipino houseboys. Asian men still appear as grocers and restaurant workers, with heavy accents. Of course, in addition to these continuing domestic stereotypes, *Kinjite: Forbidden Subjects* and other films exploit a new popular stereotype, that of the Japanese businessman. Yet, they are largely portrayed as using their financial superiority to maintain their tradition and foreign culture. For example, the 1985 film *Gung Ho* attempts to both reflect and deny these stereotypes especially when Gette Watanabe’s exaggerated politeness, awkwardness and appearance are the basis for most of the humour in the film.

Martial arts also brings us full circle from Peter Lorre in 1939 to Russell Wong today. Wong is one of the few, if not the only, Asian American hero in American
mainstream media today. His television show, *Vanishing Son*, is syndicated, but has never appeared on one of the major networks. Though Wong is treated as a sex symbol, *Vanishing Son* still builds upon stereotypes we have seen before. Each episode opens with the words, “running from oppression, searching for freedom, he came to America” while we see Wong doing martial arts. The secret behind the handsome, tough, worth millions Asian American Russell Wong may be that in fact he is half-White. Thus he represents only limited possibilities for other Asian American men to be seen as sex symbols and heroes. And even though he is half-White and probably third generation, he must still play a Chinese illegal immigrant whose speciality is martial arts. Though he is a desirable star among Asian Americans, *Vanishing Son* also shows that representations of Asian American men have a long way to go before they shake off one hundred years of Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan characterizations. Perhaps the opening line of the serial should really be “running from stereotypes, searching for freedom.”

NOTES AND REFERENCES


3 Ibid. p.xiii


6 Wong, vi.

7 Wong, 12.


Marchetti, 204.