The Other in Hollywood: Asia and Asian Americans and the Fight Against the Western Perspective

By Maya C. Ramirez

Hollywood filmmaking operates as an outlet for Western ideologies, often crafted to fit the gaze of white audiences. Asia, and Asian Americans specifically, find themselves depicted in American film as objects meant to fit the molds crafted by Western perspectives. Representation of the East as exotic, foreign, illogical, and different stems from orientalist ideas which are common in Western media. *Orientalism* by Edward Said presents the argument that many Western scholars continue to promote ideas of the Occident being superior to the Orient culturally, religiously, and ideologically.[1] Films that exhibit Orientalist ideas allow the West to take authority over the Orient and continue creating films through a colonialist lens. Repeated representations of Asians in cinema has created specific tropes or themes that prove difficult for independent filmmakers and Asian American videographers to break. Independent films, however, counter the stereotypes which are commonly disseminated among Western audiences to illuminate the damages of late capitalism and ideas surrounding the model minority. Throughout the twentieth century, Asian Americans have been relegated to limited roles like diligent workers, Kung Fu masters, and oriental "buddies" that personify the "Model Minority" on screen. The damage of Orientalism in Western cinema is incredibly evident in *Aladdin,* which eroticizes women and Eastern cultures. Multiple Asian countries, and ethnicities continue being grouped as one, where different cultures are characterized as a singular "Other." The eroticization of the East places Asia and Asian Americans in recognizable tropes, which has led

[1] Edward W Said. *Orientalism*. Brantford, Ontario,: W. Ross MacDonald School, Resource Services Library, 2006, 2

to multiple counter-movements that fight against stereotypes and racialized perceptions of Asian Americans within a white imaginary.

Asia and the East as One: Aladdin

The Disney animated film *Aladdin,* released in 1992, demonstrates classic Orientalist understandings of Asia, through the othering and exoticizing of the characters and the setting of the movie. *Aladdin* is full of unsavory and harmful portrayals of Asia, through the sexualization and villainization of Asian people. There are a vast amount of peoples encompassed by the term Asian and Asian American, however, individual cultures, and peoples are frequently mixed together as a singular other through the Western perspective. This Western perspective is a view of the world through a colonialist lens, in turn producing perceptions of those from the East as a singular group. It allows for the consumption of different Asian cultures to be palatable to Western audiences. The Western gaze has damaging effects on the ways Asian and Asian American communities are perceived. Author Serenity Joo summarizes this Western gaze as the;

> *"...ways in which Hollywood films crystallize and commodify multiple, heterogenous Asiatic cultures, histories and aesthetics into a small number of recognizable, often interchangeable tropes that help to shape dominant cultural attitudes about Asia and people of Asian descent."*[2]

This quote heavily supports the impact the Western gaze has on audiences' knowledge of the East since it classifies an array of people and places them into a singular "one."*Aladdin* is a story that follows a pauper, who is granted wishes from a genie in order to win the heart of a

2 Serenity Joo, *Oriental Style and Asian Chic: The Politics of Racial Visibility in Film and Fashion*, 155

Princess.[3] The movie revolves around Princess Jasmine, her pet tiger, and her feeble father who is the king of an Eastern city that has a mixture of many different Asian cultures. *Aladdin*, although being set in a fictional place, takes direct inspiration from Baghdad, despite utilizing other cultures as imagery for the setting. This can be seen in the architecture of the film since the palace is made to mimic the Taj Mahal, a mausoleum located in India. Besides this, the desert where the riches are located takes inspiration from the Arabian desert, illustrating the culmination of Asian locations used to make up a singular fictional place—Agrabah.

Aladdin illustrates the profound effect many Hollywood films have on the way the West pictures the East. One of the most recognizable roles in the film is Jafar who acts as the villain of the story. Spiteful and dangerous, he terrorizes the well-being of Princess Jasmine and Aladdin. Represented on screen as an evil Middle Eastern sorcerer, obsessed only with power and wealth, Jafar exemplifies a problematic Orientalist trope that is continuously repeated in Hollywood and recognized by Western audiences. Jafar's physical characteristics accentuate problematic perceptions of Asian features, as he has a long jaw, a curled thin beard, and a large nose. His personality as an evil, selfish Middle Eastern man, wishing to deceive those around him heavily coincides with Western stereotypes. Jafar illustrates the creation of recognizable themes of the East for the consumption of Western audiences. Besides this, Jafar also participates in a trope of a character consistently used by the West to organize Middle Eastern people as a singular one, sharing the same kinds of spiteful characteristics. This engages with the tropes created to characterize Asian Americans, as an *other* by being placed in recognizable and stereotypical roles.

Besides the villainizing of Middle Eastern characters, *Aladdin* also sexualizes and

3 Ron Clements, *Aladdin,* November 25, 1992; USA: Walt Disney Pictures, Movie

exoticizes women. Throughout the film, women living in fictional Agrabah dress in sheer garments and bare midriffs, depicting hyper-sexualized characterizations of Middle Eastern women. This includes Princess Jasmine, whose sexualization far exceeds any of the other Disney Princesses. Princess Jasmine wears an incredibly revealing sheer garment, and uses it to seduce her way out of captivity. This scene is misleading to audiences and showcases a seductive woman attempting to trick the villain of the story. *Aladdin* depicts the damaging effects Western cinema has on the understanding of Asia.

The Signature Tropes: Characterizing Asian Americans

In *Oriental Style and Asian Chic: The Politics of Racial Visibility in Film and Fashion,* film scholar Serenity Joo explains how the Model Minority myth continues to play a large role in the perception of Asian Americans on-screen. Western films present stereotypes through Asian values, such as obedience, skill, and intelligence, as more desirable than those held by other, more "problematic minorities" in the white American imagination. These favorable skills such as being talented in martial arts, academic endeavors, and even expressing American patriotism began building characteristics that shaped the repeated representations of Asia and Asian Americans on screen. The tropes indicate the admirable characteristics the West assumes of all Asian Americans, although they are still referred to as "other.[4]" Orientalist ideologies which permeate into the depictions of Asia and the damaging effects Western cinema has on the perceptions of Asia and Asian Americans are evident through the model minority myth and their depictions through various tropes. The model minority myth is common among Western impressions of Asian Americans since they are portrayed as a minority with noble characteristics.

[4] Joo, *Oriental Style and Asian Chic,* 154

Similar to the way the East itself is frequently characterized and categorized as an *other* for the consumption of Western audiences, Asian Americans are also assigned recognizable roles to fulfill in Western cinema. The trope of the compliant Asian worker is a persistent theme that presents Asians silently laboring for the superior white men who dominate the film's narrative. These negative impressions have lasting effects on Asian people and communities and present a narrative of Asians as subservient and silent workers. This trope of the obedient Asian worker perpetuates the false understanding of Asian people's purpose—to follow and be advantageous for their white leaders.

Blade Runner (1982) demonstrates the trope of easily exploitable Asian laborers. *Blade Runner* follows the story of Deckard, a police boss sent out to adopt his old job of being a Replicant, or synthetic human hunter. Set in a futuristic Los Angeles, *Blade Runner* appears technologically advanced and future-forward, a theme frequently used to characterize East Asia.[5] This is due in part to Japan and China becoming economic superpowers in the early 1980s, where Asia became a metaphor in the film for futurity in the American imagination. Despite these technologically advanced scenes, the film represents Asian people as obedient, naïve, hushed workers serving the white man's every need. This is incredibly evident in the noodle scene, which occurs within the first ten minutes of the movie and is commonly referred to as one of the most iconic moments of Deckerd in the film. This sets the tone of the naive Asian worker as Deckard orders a bowl of noodles from a stand. The Japanese man working the stand is confused, and does not understand Deckerd's request until he says it forcefully. Following this he serves him quietly, thanking him for his patronage. Joo argues *Blade Runner* is controversial because of its portrayal of Asians in a futuristic America, making it easily digestible for Western

[5] Scott Ridley, *Blade Runner,* June 25 1982; USA: The Lad Company, Shaw Brothers, Movie

audiences, this is evident through their styles and customs which Joo elaborates in the following passage: "..the distinct 'film noir' vision that is dependent upon the representation of Asia as a 'consumable style' and Asians as 'invisible workers.'"[6] Despite the Asian workers and their commitment to the advanced project composing the entire story's backbone of the *Blade Runner* film, the narrative of the film is controlled by the white men in it. Joo mentions that the plot relies on the interactions between the white leaders and Asian workers continuing perceptions of Asian peoples purpose: "invisible Asian laborers structure the film's narrative questioning the limits of humanity, literally serving and working for the film's primary white characters.[7]" This way, the film regurgitates Western ideologies of Asian people's inability to lead, reinforcing the belief that Asian countries should follow the lead of Western nations as the only means of success. This illustrates the model minority myth since it characterizes Asian Americans as obedient and willing to follow and assimilate to Western ideologies.

The "Asian Buddy" trope further bolsters the model minority myth by depicting Asian Americans as patriotic and hard working. The Asian buddy is shown through characters made to seem overly assimilationist toward Western culture. Mr. Miyagi in *The Karate Kid* (1984) strongly illuminates the ways the role of the Asain buddy plays into the model minority myth.[8] The *Karate Kid* provides comfort within the unstable reality of late capitalism by valorizing the honorable, hardworking Japanese veteran Miyagi while juxtaposing him with the dishonorable white soldier. In the film, Mr. Miyagi, an Asian American war veteran, teaches a young boy karate in order to defeat the fighters from the Cobra Kai dojo, a white karate studio. The Cobra Kai sensei is white, yet he is shown as an ignominious American because of his dishonorable

[6] Joo, *Oriental Style and Asian Chic,* 156
[7] Joo, *Oriental Style and Asian Chic,* 156
[8] John Avildsen, *The Karate Kid,* June 22, 1984; USA: Delphi II Productions, Movie

discharge from military service during the Vietnam War. Mr. Miyagi teaches Daniel (the karate kid) through manual labor, this includes waxing cars and painting fences, jobs which are typically deemed as unskilled work. Despite Mr. Miyagi being seen as a teacher, through the process, he becomes a friend and role model to Daniel, further illustrating his patriotism, due to his dedication to justice and his past as a veteran. The Asian buddy films have a large impact on the perceptions of Asian Americans as a model minority since they stand as a way to help further develop the white protagonist while simultaneously teaching the white character how to navigate through the pressures of late capitalism.[9] Late capitalism was a prominent theme and idea from post World War II and is a term utilized to characterize the large industrial boom which occurred internationally and within the United States. This massive economic and consumerist empire began influencing the ideas of the Other within the West, in order to reassure white audiences that they were not being threatened by Asian economic superpowers. This ties into the ways Mr. Miyagi is represented throughout the film as a model minority, associating Asian Americans with dedicated patriotism, disseminating the racialized trope of a devoted, "Asian buddy" to a new generation of American filmgoers.

Unlike the Oriental Buddy which focuses on the Asian teacher and friend to a white protagonist, the Kung Fu master role accentuates idealized Asian American characteristics. Despite the Kung Fu master theme being used to benefit Western cinema, it has allowed actors like Bruce Lee to shed light on the upsetting portrayals of Asian Americans. Typically, Western cinema fits Asian Americans in roles which are digestible to Western audiences, making it impossible for real Asian stories to be told. Popular movies that use the Kung Fu master trope include *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon,* and *Enter the Dragon.* Although there

[9] Joo, *Oriental Style and Asian Chic,* 156

is stereotyping within these films, Bruce Lee created a platform by using his stardom for activism. This granted for movies like the ones mentioned to garner popularity and attention despite depicting strong Asian characters and narratives.

The legacy of Bruce Lee illustrates a positive side of the Kung Fu master trope, as Bruce Lee began breaking the Asian American molds due to his depiction as a martial arts hero. Although Bruce Lee still fiis into the model minority, he is able to transcend the typical definition due to his fight against stereotypical Asian American images, which is shown in his film *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story.* The film is a narrative based around Bruce Lee and his martial art pursuits, made in 1993 and directed by Rob Cohen, who would later direct *The Mummy* and *Fast and Furious.*[10] There is a specific scene where Bruce Lee and his girlfriend are in a theater watching *Breakfast at Tiffany's.* As the audience within the theatre laughs at Mickey Rooney's portrayal of a naive Asian man in severe yellowface despite being white, Bruce Lee gazes at the screen before his girlfriend ushers him out of the theater, understanding the upsetting result of the racist portrayal of Asian Americans in movies. Bruce Lee was able to convey the damaging and degrading results of the Western depiction of Asians and Asian Americans on screen. This is done primarily through his reaction to a white man playing an ignorant Asian character through the use of yellowface. Bruce Lee, challenged the stereotypical roles many Chinese Americans and East Asian Americans are delegated to identify with, and continued crafting his own stories and utilizing his roles as a Kung Fu master to combat hurtful portrayals of Asians and Asian Americans in a creative space dominated by the white American imaginary.

Bruce Lee was a martial artist, a hero, and a sidekick, and he eventually used his story to

[10] Rob Cohen, *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story,* May 7, 1993; USA: Universal Pictures, Movie

try to change the Western portrayal of Asian Americans in film. Bruce Lee stands as one of the first Asian actors to resist baised depictions in Western cinema and the damages it causes Asian Americans in Hollywood and in the United States. Bruce Lee was able to build a platform for the Asian American community, one which was soon occupied by Jackie Chan. However, this platform was also capitalized on by white actors. Films like *Game of Death (1978)* and *The Way of the Dragon (1972)* use Eastern martial arts in predominantly white stories, appropriating a racialized trope in such a way that supports white supremacy in cinema. Older movies like these, featuring Chuck Norris as the main character misappropriated Asian Americans in film, a pattern that continues and is evident through *The Matrix (1999)* and *Kill Bill (2003)*. These movies not only exhibit Asian customs through a colonialist lens but also misappropriated cultures while simultaneously using them to portray white protagonists and heroes.

One of the overarching issues of the Kung Fu master trope is despite the innovations made by Asian Americans in redefining the theme, the roles are still adopted and appropriated by white actors, revoking the power earned by Asian American actors. In turn, the theme has left a problematic and harmful mark on Asian Americans in cinema placing Asian American characters in racialized, stereotypical roles to become more digestible for white audiences. Western cinema has constructed images of Asian Americans as obedient, assimilated, or "other" resulting in Asian American audiences rarely seeing stories of Asian histories, struggles, or the reality of their existence as a minority in America.

Resistance: Asian American Cinema

Racialized themes have been repeatedly challenged, especially through the Visual Communication Movements of the early 1970s, which sought to tell true stories of Asian Americans. Motivated young Asian American filmmakers unified under this movement and

created films that captured Asian American history and rejected Western cinematic stereotypes. The stereotypical depictions of Asian Americans in cinema lead to the creation of Visual Communications, National Asian American Telecommunications Association (NAATA), and Asian Cine Vision (ACV), which redefined the presentation of Asian Americans in film. The goal of these movements was to challenge the harmful racial consequences of fitting Asia and Asian Americans into specific tropes while demonstrating the reality and vitality of Asian Americans through the depiction of honest cultures and histories.

Visual Communications was a program that began at UCLA in the early 1970s and prompted the development of a co-authorship between students and independent Asian American filmmakers. Since the majority of the work produced by Asian American filmmakers and students were documentaries, they heavily influenced the artistic community and Asian American identities. Visual Communication films were anti-capitalist, challenged Western ideologies, and led to the creation of Ethno-Communications, a movement which motivated Independent Asian filmmakers to work together on projects, like the Asian American film *Manzanar* (1971). *Manzanar* is a documentary that paints a vividly accurate picture of life at Japanese internment camps during World War II.[11] Author Jun Okada explains the strong impact *Manzanar* had on the Asian American community as well as the films effort to confront racism: "*Manzanar* was less an attempt to master the form of cinema than an attempt to use cinema as a device of preservation and documentation with a decidedly ideological purpose: to redress the internment with the larger project to fight racism.[12]" *Manzanar* is meaningful and relevant to the Asian American community by illustrating the struggles faced by Asian Americans. *Manzanar* was able to outstrip the typical shackles of the Western perspective as it

[11] Robert Nakamura, *Manzanar,* 1971; USA: UCLA Ethno Communications Program

[12] Jun , Okada, *Noble and Uplifting and Boring as Hell': Asian American Film and Video*, *1971-1982*, 26

heavily resonated with Asian American audiences by attempting to fracture the pre-existing tropes in Western cinema. These regurgitated themes in Western cinema came from ideas of Asian Americans dictated by the West. *Manzanar* exhibits the ways in which the Visual Communication movement sought to produce films that touched the Asian American community and redefine the connection between Asian Americans and cinema.

The portrayal of real stories of Asian Americans, characterizing their struggles of being accepted in America allows for the Asian community to acknowledge their losses and move towards a united future. The search for Asian American stories in film allowed for cinema to become a tool that remembers Asian American history and commemorates the struggles Asian Americans have faced. As mentioned by Okada in *Noble and Uplifting and Boring as Hell: Asian-American Film and Video*, Visual Communications, along with NAATA, motivated Asian American filmmakers to redefine the importance of cinema to Asian American communities and the creation of films for greater social change.[13] By acknowledging the existence of there being "Asian American films," it confirms that there are Asian American cultures and communities attached to cinema produced accurately by Asian Americans.[14] This idea is firmly illustrated by filmmakers acknowledging the struggles of Asian Americans and depicting them on screen without stereotypes, which has allowed them to preserve the stories of Asian Americans and maintain a connection with Asian Americans' past, to move towards a unified future. Evidence of this can be found in the 1988 documentary *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* which follows the story of Vincent Chin, an Asian American who fell victim to a hate crime and lost his life by being beaten to death by white auto shop workers. Due to its documentary format, the film outlines anti-capitalist

[13] Ibid, 27

[14] Peter X. Feng, "In Search of Asian American Cinema." *Cinéaste* 21, no. 1/2 (1995), 32

ideas by depicting the damaging and deadly effects of late capitalism.[15] Vincent Chin lost his life to auto shop workers who disliked Asian Americans partially due to negative perceptions of Asian economic superpowers. Asian automobile companies were weakening the American economy, and many white Americans grew fearful for their jobs and livelihoods. Many felt that Asian Americans were to blame for America's debilitating economy, especially with regards to the automotive industry. Vincent Chin's story presented audiences with a genuine, despondent story of Asian American struggle within the United States, and the constant fight for justice.

More Asian American organizations formed, and although the movement began on the West Coast, it soon spread to the East. The formation of Asian Cine Vision in New York promoted the first Asian Film Festival in 1978. Despite the noble and impactful movements created by independent Asian American filmmakers, there were small developments as independent works continued to produce, but few were Hollywood theatrical releases. Even into the 1990's popular releases like *Joy Luck Club* and *M. Butterfly* were still being regarded as Asian cinema, continuing the idea of Asian American filmmakers being separate from the Hollywood monopoly. However, this does not discredit the work done by the movements and organizations of the '70s as mentioned by Peter Feng in his article; *The State of Asian American Cinema: In Search of Community;*

> *"*..most Asian American filmmakers acknowledge that a variety of institutions have helped them complete their films and find audiences, ranging from National Asian American Telecommunications Association (NAATA) grants to Asian American film festivals…"

Feng emphasizes the power these organizations held for Asian American filmmakers decades

[15] Christine Choy, *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*, 1987; USA: Filmakers Library, Movie

after they were created.[16] Organizations like NAATA and Visual Communications challenged the racialized ideas regurgitated in cinema by funding and promoting movies created by and for Asian American audiences. These organizations, movements, and studies influenced the presentations of Asian Americans in cinema today.

Asian Americans are a part of American culture, their contributions are evident through history and politics, yet they still hold the title of "other" in a white American society. In many ways, Asian Americans are the Other, lacking recognition and being placed in understandable themes and tropes, consumed by Western audiences. The struggles to change the perceptions of Asia and Asian Americans continue in cinema, but as Asian representation grows, so too does the respect within the industry for upcoming writers, directors, and actors. With the recent release and popular response to *Crazy Rich Asians* and *Parasite,* there is a heightened production of Asian written scripts. The increased presence of Asian stories and cultures within Hollywood further accentuates the understanding that Asian American culture is a part of American culture. Due to the influence of multiple Asian American film organizations, the call for a change in representation persists as the struggles of being an Asian American grows more prominent in the media. Although the history of Asian Americans in cinema has been ridden with stereotypes and appropriated by Western ideologies, there is a movement towards altering this once unbreakable mold. Despite new films coming out, many still prove to be problematic interacting with the tropes of Asian American characters. Challenging these themes are incredibly difficult for filmmakers, however, there are steps to change as Hollywood is accepting different depictions of cultures and people. Those who have been the "other" in society continue to be separated from what is considered the mainstream which is encapsulated in a Western space. With the

[16] Peter X. Feng, "The State of Asian American Cinema: In Search of Community." *Cinéaste* 24, no. 4 (1999), 24.

acceptance of Asian American writers, directors, and actors the Other is beginning to occupy a space within America as Asian cultures now being seen as a part of American stories and cinema.

Bibliography

Christine, Choy, *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*, 1987; USA: Filmakers Library, Movie.

John, Avildsen, *The Karate Kid,* June 22, 1984; USA: Delphi II Productions, Movie.

Joo, Hee-Jung Serenity. “Oriental Style and Asian Chic: The Politics of Racial Visibility in Film and Fashion.” American Studies, vol. 52, no. 1, 2012, pp. 153–162.

Okada, Jun. “‘Noble and Uplifting and Boring as Hell’: Asian American Film and Video, 1971-1982.” Cinema Journal, vol. 49, no. 1, 2009, pp. 20–40.

Feng, Peter. "In Search of Asian American Cinema." *Cinéaste* 21, no. 1/2 (1995): 32-35.

Feng, Peter X. "The State of Asian American Cinema: In Search of Community." *Cinéaste* 24, no. 4 (1999): 20-24.

Ridley, Scott, *Blade Runner,* June 25 1982; USA: The Lad Company, Shaw Brothers, Movie.

Rob, Cohen, *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story,* May 7, 1993; USA: Universal Pictures, Movie.

Robert, Nakamura, *Manzanar,* 1971; USA: UCLA Ethno Communications Program, Movie.

Ron, Clements, *Aladdin,* November 25, 1992; USA: Walt Disney Pictures, Movie.

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Brantford, Ont.: W. Ross MacDonald School, Resource Services Library, 2006.