

ASIAN WOMEN'S IMAGES IN FILM: THE PAST SIXTY YEARS

Renee Tajima

If Anna May Wong were to reappear in Hollywood today, she would find few improvements on the one-dimensional characters she had to play half a century ago. Commercial American films are to a great extent, populated by stereotyped characters that range in complexity, accuracy and persistence over time. Typical images of Asian women, however, have been low on complexity and high on persistence. Basically there are two types: the Lotus Blossom Baby (China Doll, Geisha Girl, shy Polynesian beauty, et. al.) and the Dragon Lady (Fu Manchu's various female relations, prostitutes, sometimes Suzie Wong), with little in-between. All of the dozens of Asian and Pacific Island cultures are lumped into one homogeneous identity, thus Korean and Vietnamese women in the 1950's-70's war films are commonly called Mama-San despite the Japanese (American) origins of that term.

Asian women in American cinema are interchangeable in appearance and name, and are joined together by the common language of non-language—that is, uninterpretable chattering, pidgin English, giggling or silence. Like Aunt Jemima and the Mexican Spitfire, Asian female prototypes are among the cinema's most predictable and enduring creations.

Asian women in film are, for the most part, passive figures who exist to serve men—as love interests for white men (re: Lotus Blossoms) or as partners in crime for men of their own kind (re: Dragon Ladies). One of the first Dragon Lady types was played by Anna May Wong who, in the 1924 spectacular *THE THIEF OF BAGDAD* uses treachery to help an evil Mongol prince attempt to win the Princess of Bagdad over Douglas Fairbanks. The Lotus Blossom Baby—as a sexual-romantic object, has been the most prominent type throughout the years. These "Oriental" flowers are utterly feminine, delicate and welcome respites from their often loud, indepen-



The Thief of Bagdad, Anna Mae Wong

dent American counterparts. For them, feudal Asian customs do not change. Picture brides, geisha girls, concubines and hari kari are all mixed up into one and reintroduced in any number of settings. Take for example these two visions of Asian and American cultural interaction:

I. It's Toko Riki on Japan's Okinawa Island during the late 1940's, in the film, *TEAHOUSE OF THE AUGUST MOON*. American occupation forces nice-guy Glenn Ford (Captain Fisby) gets a visit from local Japanese peasant Marlon Brando (Sakini).

Enter Brando: "Hey Boss, I Sonoda has a present for you."

Enter the gift: Japanese actress Machiko Kyo as a geisha. (giggling).

Ford: "Who's she?"

Brando: "Souvenir . . . Introducing Lotus Blossom geisha girl first class."

Ford protests the gift. Kyo giggles.

Brando sneaks out with a smile:

"Good night, Boss." Kyo chattering away in Japanese, tries to pamper a bewildered Ford who holds up an instructive finger and repeats, slowly, "Me . . . me . . . no . . ."

II. It's San Francisco, circa 1981, in the television series "The Incredible Hulk." Nice guy Bill Bixby (David Banner a.k.a. The Hulk) gets a visit from a Chinese yenta.

Beulah Quo (Hyung): "David, I have something for you . . ."

Enter Irene Sun as Tam, a Chinese refugee, bowing her head shyly.

Quo hands Bixby the goods: "The Floating Lotus Company hopes you will be very happy. This is Tam, your mail-order bride."

Bixby protests the gift. Sun, speaking only Chinese tries to pamper a bewildered Bixby who repeats slowly to her in an instructive tone,

"you . . . must . . . go!"

Tam looks confused.

Dutiful creatures that they are, Asian women are often assigned the task of expendability in a situation of illicit Asian-white love. The most convenient way of resolving the problems of miscegenation has generally been to get rid of the Asian partner. Noticeably lacking is the portrayal of love relationships between Asian woman and Asian men, particularly as lead characters. As in Machiko Kyo's case in *TEAHOUSE*, the man often loves from afar, but runs a distant second to the tall, handsome American. Asian men usually have their own problems with interracial affairs quite often as rapists or love-struck losers. Generally, Asian male roles reflect the state of U.S.-Asian relations at the time. Thus, during the Yellow Menace period of the early 1900's, World War II and the McCarthy years, the number of Asian leches lusting after white women on the screen increased appreciably.

American films are almost never made about Asia or Asians—rather, Asia is the setting and Asians revolve around the world of white leads. The most notable exception is the 1937 movie version of Pearl Buck's *THE GOOD EARTH*. Here is a story about Chinese in China depicted with some complexity and emotion. Nevertheless, the lead parts played by Luise Rainer and Paul Muni follow a pattern of choosing white stars for lead roles which continues to plague Asian actors.

According to Irving Paik (*THAT ORIENTAL FEELING*, in *Roots: An Asian American Reader*), an Asian actress had actually been cast for the female lead, but was dropped after William Hays' Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors disapproved of the prospect of a white male-Asian female pair on the screen.

White actresses who have played Asian roles include Katherine Hepburn in the 1944 film, *THE DRAGON SEED* (sporting adhesive tape over her eyes), Jennifer Jones as an Eurasian in *LOVE IS A MANY SPLENDORED THING*, Ona Munson as Gin Sling, the "Chinese Dietrich" in Josef Sternberg's *SHANGHAI GESTURE*, and Angie Dickinson in Samuel Fuller's *CHINA GATE*. Here Dickinson plays a Eurasian in Indochina who guides a French and South Vietnamese patrol on a mission to destroy a Communist ammunition dump. The American demolitionist just happens to be the man who deserted Dickinson and their child. In the end, Dickinson's Eurasian character nobly sets off the explosion and dies, following in the footsteps of Anna May Wong who 39 years earlier walked into the sea when she and her half-breed child were spurned by American in-laws in *THE TOLL OF THE SEA*.

One film that stands out as having portrayed Asian peoples' lives as played by an Asian cast is *FLOWER DRUM SONG* (1961), set in San Francisco's Chinatown. Unfortunately, the film did little more good than to take a number of talented Asian American actresses and actors temporarily off the unemployment lines. In fact, *FLOWER DRUM SONG* gave birth to a whole new generation of stereotypes—gum chewing Little Leaguers, enterprising businessmen and all-American tomboys of the new model minority myth. *FLOWER DRUM SONG* hinted that the assimilated hyphenated Asian American might do a whole lot better than the Japanese of the 1940's and the Chinese and Koreans of the 1950's, granted they keep fast to the road of assimilation.

The women of *FLOWER DRUM SONG* were more of the same with a few modernizations. Miyoshi Umeki is still a picture bride (three or four decades too late), and

former SUZIE WONG actress Nancy Kwan is a hipper Americanized version of the Hong Kong bar girl (without the pidgin English). But updated clothes and settings do not change the essence of these images.

Something must also be said about the standards of beauty set for Asian women in the movies. While Caucasian women are often used for Asian roles, beauty has become for Asian women the same old story of aesthetic imperialism, Asian actresses invariably have large eyes, high cheekbones and other Caucasian characteristics when they appear on the silver screen. Much of Anna May Wong's appeal—an actress who brought dignity and artistry to the screen, despite her many degrading roles were the Western aspects of her look. The June 1924 *Photoplay* describes her in the following:

"Her deep brown eyes, while the slant is not pronounced, are typically oriental. These come from her Mongol father. But her Manchu mother has given her a height and poise of figure that Chinese maidens seldom have."

There is yet another important and pervasive characteristic of Asian women on the screen—invisibility. The number of roles in the Oriental flower and Dragon Lady categories have been few enough, and these are generally only supporting parts. Otherwise, Asian women are simply absent. Asian women do not appear in films as union organizers, or divorced mothers fighting for the custody of their children, or fading movie stars, or spunky trial lawyers, or teachers in inner city schools; Asian women are not portrayed as "ordinary people" in the mainstream cinematic sense nor in terms of their own identities and experience.

Then there is the other kind of invisibility—when individual personalities and separate identities become indistinguishable. Some memorable Asian masses: the islanders fleeing exploding volcanoes in KRAKATOA: EAST OF JAVA (1969) and the Vietnamese villagers fleeing Cop-pola's airborne weaponry in various scenes from APOCALYPSE NOW (1979). Asian women either populate these hordes or they have groupings of their

own, usually in some type of harem situation. In CRY FOR HAPPY (1961), Glenn Ford is cast as an American G.I. who stumbles into what turns out to be the best little geisha house in Japan.

The most exciting prospects for creating better film images of Asian women are, of course, Asian women filmmakers themselves, most of whom began their careers only since the late 1970's. These filmmakers draw from deeply personal perspectives. Virginia Hashii's JENNY portrays a young Japanese American girl who explores her own Nikkei heritage for the first time; Christine Choy's FROM SPIKES TO SPINDLES (1976) documents the views of Chinese garment workers and a Chinatown teenager facing the conflicts of tradition and urban adolescence, among others; Felicia Lowe's CHINA: LAND OF MY FATHER (1979) is a film diary of the filmmaker's own first reunion with her grandmother in China; Renee Cho's THE NEW WIFE (1978), dramatizes the arrival of an immigrant bride to America; and Lana Phi Jokel's CHIANG CHING: A DANCE JOURNEY traces the colorful life of dancer-actress-teacher Chiang.

The films listed above account for a little more than two hours of screening time yet they are revealing and substantive—all are first films. Christine Choy has produced several important films since SPIKES which deal with Asian American and feminist subject matter. There are many others who can be counted on to produce works about Asian women in the future. Mira Nair's new film SO FAR FROM INDIA includes scenes detailing the traditions and expectations faced by an East Indian woman which are as penetrating as the overall focus on the woman's husband, an immigrant to the United States.

Outside the United States, Asian women have been more successful with feature projects. Tizuka Yamasaki's GAIZIN: A BRAZILIAN ODYSSEY is close to our hearts in its portrayal of an immigrant, a worker and a pioneer. Set on a Brazilian coffee plantation, GAIZIN captures the spirit and heritage of first generation American women. Yamasaki

based GAIZIN on her own grandmother's experiences—a personal source which has similarly inspired Asian American filmmakers. GAIZIN has another message, that is, a film which sensitively and accurately depicts the experience of Asian women can be commercially viable.

Asian men have produced several sensitive documentary portraits of Asian women: Jon Wing Lum's OURSELVES (1981), Michael Uno's EMI (1978), and Arthur Dong's SEWING WOMAN (1982) are good examples. The majority of works by Asian men do remain somewhat male-oriented, and are often accounts based on fathers, grandfathers and other significant men in their lives. The only two Asian American feature films, CHAN IS MISSING by Wayne Wang and HITO HATA: RAISE THE BANNER by Duane Kubo and Robert Nakamura of Visual Communications, both revolve around the lives and relationships of the male protagonists.

Several generations of Asian women have grown up being exposed to racist and sexist celluloid images. The models for passivity and downright servility set in these films fit neatly into the model minority myth and contrast sharply with more liberating ideals of independence and activism. The unreal standards of beauty,

feminity and sexuality have perpetuated a good deal of self-hatred. Eye-lid operations, perms, leg stretching, silicon treatments and hair bleachings are gross yet frequent reactions inspired by this type of repression of cultural identity. There is a dehumanizing process implicit in stereotypes of expendability and invisibility that is frightening. The emergence of an Asian American filmmaking community has been the key factor in reversing the prevailing state of affairs of Asian women's images.

Although there are few Asian American films in general, and I could count the number of Asian American films about Asian women on my fingers, there is a growing number of women filmmakers. From the looks of what has already been produced, this infant genre is the most promising. I suspect Asian women's images in the mainstream media will remain stagnant—after 60 years, it has shown few signs of progress. As more Asian women do become filmmakers, they are very likely to shake up the industry quite a bit, and begin to fill the huge gaps. Anna May Wong might well turn happily in her grave.

Renee Tajima is the administrative director of Asian Cine-Vision (N.Y.C.) and editor of Bridge Magazine.

MUJERES CUBANAS Y LA REVOLUCION: USING MEDIA TO IMPROVE THE STATUS OF WOMEN

Dr. Caren Deming

Excerpts from a paper delivered at the International Communication Association Annual Conference in Acapulco, 18-23 May 1980.

The realization of the Cuban Revolution's development necessitates drastic changes in the roles of women in Cuban life. The achievement of developmental goals requires the upheaval of deeply rooted mores pertaining to sex roles, marriage and the family. This paper summarizes the developmental aims for women as articulated by the government

and describes the ways in which mass media, particularly film, have been used to implement them.

Women in Pre-Revolutionary Cuba

Women in pre-revolutionary Cuba were oppressed by multiple forces of class (as peasants or workers), sexual and racial