

Yellow Peril Smackdown: A Night at the Chinese American Museum

by Renee Tajima-Peña

He is brilliant, cultured, a sexually ambiguous metrosexual whose wardrobe could be off the rack from Shanghai Tang. His manicure may be extreme for most tastes, but certainly boosts his healthy Q rating.

He's done print, movies, TV, radio, the Web, board games; a stoner rock band is named for him and so is a cocktail. He is global.

He is Fu Manchu.

It is fitting that Fu Manchu shadows over this unprecedented exhibition of movie ephemera collected by Arthur Dong while researching his landmark history, *Hollywood Chinese* (2007). Fu Manchu represents the western cinema's tainted marriage between art and politics, a union that is both mercenary and codependent. As a third-

generation Asian American filmmaker, I can't remember life without him. Fu Manchu's brand has been remarkably durable, ever since his stories were first serialized in a London magazine in 1911. The "yellow peril incarnate in one man" was borne to the imagination of author Sax Rohmer, but he represented the collective racial paranoia of a declining British empire after China's Boxer Rebellion, the

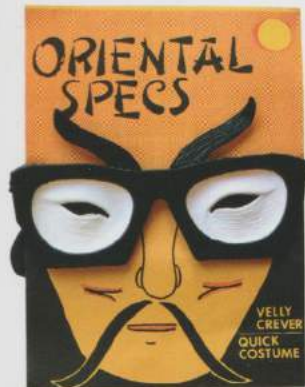
launching point of the 1917 novel, *The Hand of Fu Manchu*. And paranoia sells. As Rohmer said of British readers still reeling from the anti-imperialist uprising in China, "Conditions for launching a Chinese villain on the market were ideal. . . ."¹

Fu Manchu was neither first, nor the last icon of Chinese evilness or Asian male stereotype—always a schizophrenic coupling of femme and lecher—that has made its bed with geopolitical racial anxieties. The late 19th and early 20th centuries were replete

with formative imaginings of the Oriental as other. But Fu Manchu was an enduring franchise and archetype. Travel through the years in this exhibition and you'll find a Fu Manchu look-alike in Norman Foster's 1936 low-budget thriller, *I Cover Chinatown*. Feminized, amply fingernailed, and alien, he dominates the poster whether or not he, or Chinatown for that matter, plays much of a role in the actual movie. The Oriental Specs displayed here can still be bought online; just Google "Chop Suey Specs." A matching Fu Manchu moustache made from human or synthetic hair can be found on Amazon.com. There has been a Fu Manchu for every generation.

The evil Dr. Fu Manchu and his nefarious spawn have dogged Asian Americans through the decades. I'm not referring to the usual annoyances like schoolyard name-calling or Miley Cyrus making slanty eyes on Web gossip pics. Images have power, whether employed by the state to demonize enemies, real or imagined, or in everyday minefields of racial encounters. Those hazards were brought home to Asian Americans when a Chinese American draftsman named Vincent Chin was beaten to death by two white autoworkers in Detroit, a case I documented on film twenty years ago.² When the defendants faced a hate crime prosecution for violating Chin's civil rights, much of the testimony centered on racial slurs and the anti-Asian atmosphere generated by Japanese auto imports. Hostilities in the cultural ether may make racial targeting socially acceptable, but hate crime cases





TOP (clockwise, l-r): French poster for *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1965); Peter Sellers in *The Fiendish Plot of Dr. Fu Manchu* (1980); *I Cover Chinatown* (1936); Cecil Holland prepares Boris Karloff for *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932); *Fu Manchu's Hidden Hoard* board game (1967); Oriental Specs eyepiece (year unknown).

OPPOSITE: Book jacket for *The Hand of Fu Manchu* (1917). BACKGROUND: Design derived from the poster for *The Vengeance of Fu Manchu* (1968).



often hinge on motive and the interior mind of the perpetrator. What enraged Ronald Ebens to the point of hunting Chin down through the streets of Detroit and beating his brains out with a Louisville slugger? Was it the fact that Chin, a gregarious former football player, was nobody's idea of a wilting Chinaman, no descendant of D.W. Griffith's other broken blossom, the emasculated Chink?³ For Asian Americans, images can be a matter of life and death.

America's frequent wars in Asia have been the same toxic mix of archetype and aggression, writ large. Fu Manchu is instructive because he embodied western anxiety over Asian power, not weakness. That threat recurred during a century of violent conflicts, job competition from immigrants, and more recently, the rising economic power of China along with Japan, India, and the other Asian tigers. Even periods of goodwill have a geopolitical subtext. Dong's collection tracks the dizzying sweep of these bipolar relations, as Fu Manchu morphs into the benevolent Charlie Chan, then a dagger-wielding "Red Chinese" in *Hong Kong* (1952), then a delectable Fan Tan Fannie in *Flower Drum Song* (1961).

Ancestors in Screenland

It would be wrong to view this exhibition solely through an anti-racist critique of the Asian as perpetual victim. What makes *Hollywood Chinese* stand out is its chronology of the vital, parallel track of Chinese American cinematic agency inside and outside the Hollywood industrial complex. I once

thought that Asian American film pioneers dated back only to the independent filmmakers who emerged during the Asian American culture and politics movement of the 1960s and 70s. In fact, it was after the work of a cadre of curators, scholars, and filmmakers like Dong, that the forbearers of Asian American screen resistance finally began to be uncovered.

A startling find from Dong's *Hollywood Chinese* research is the silent, *The Curse of Quon Gwon*, the earliest known Chinese American feature film. Produced in 1916, a year before Fu Manchu's first arrival on screen, Marion Wong wrote, directed, costumed, and co-starred in this love story about a couple cursed by a Chinese god for their western ways. It is breathtaking to imagine the enormity of Marion Wong's feat. Young, Chinese American, a woman. *The Curse of Quon Gwon* was made during an intensive and extended period of anti-Asian enmity. Asians were subjected to racial violence and denied basic rights; anti-miscegenation laws existed in a majority of states. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which restricted Chinese immigration, was already law, and by 1917, Congress would extend the prohibitions by enacting an Asiatic Barred Zone. That same Immigration Act of 1917 excluded idiots, imbeciles, feeble-minded persons, epileptics, insane persons, and other undesirables from entering the United States.⁴ Archetypes of the Asian subject had evolved in print, minstrelsy, and song, and now gravitated to the cinema.⁵



TOP: *The Curse of Quon Gwon* (1916), the earliest known Chinese American feature film, directed by Marion Wong. INSET: Anna May Wong, autographed: "Orientially Yours, Anna May Wong" (year unknown).

OPPOSITE (l-r): Violet Wong in *The Curse of Quon Gwon* (1916); filmmaker Marion Wong (left) and actress Violet Wong in their "Chinese Princesses" dance act (ca. 1910s); Marion and Violet Wong (ca. 1910s).

The stunning visual revelation of *The Curse of Quon Gwon*, as pictured in these stills from the production, is complemented by its colorful backstory. Marion Wong was a third-generation Chinese American born in San Francisco in 1895 to a family that first migrated to the United States during the Gold Rush. She was only twenty-one years old when she enlisted her extended relations to perform in her seven-reeler film. As family legend has it, Wong discovered moviemaking when Charlie Chaplin was filming nearby her family's Oakland, California restaurant. "I had never seen any Chinese movies, so I decided to introduce them to the world," Wong told a local newspaper, "I first wrote the love story. Then I decided that people who are interested in my people and my country would like to see some of the customs and manners of China. So I added to the love drama many scenes depicting these things. I do hope it will be a success." Fittingly, part of the original 35mm silver nitrate print was transferred to 16mm by Wong's grandnephew, Gregory Yee Mark, a professor of Asian American Studies who had participated in the strike for Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley.⁶ The film was largely forgotten outside of Wong's family until Dong discovered two of the original reels in the possession of the daughters of Violet Wong, Marion's sister-in-law, dance performance partner, and the star of *The Curse of Quon Gwon*.

Even Anna May Wong, the only female Asian American star before Nancy Kwan and Lucy Liu,

was not able to match Marion Wong's behind-the-camera initiative. In 1924, the actress created Anna May Wong Productions to produce films based on Chinese myths, but the company closed after a dispute with her business partner.⁷ As an actress,



Anna May Wong is one of the most riveting personalities in Asian American screen history. The third-generation daughter of a Los Angeles laundryman, Wong was the first Asian American woman lead in a Hollywood movie, *The Toll of the Sea* (1922). Her role as the ill-fated Lotus Flower is an early prototype

of what film scholar Gina Marchetti describes as the stock Madame Butterfly story.⁸

Wong's talent was enormous, but her career was dictated by racism within and without the industry. Beginning with her breakout, albeit supporting role, as the Mongol Slave Girl in *Thief of Bagdad* (1924), Wong became the consummate screen Dragon Lady, a caricature she abhorred. Despite sometimes playing one, in life Wong was no wilting lotus flower. Disgusted with yellowface casting and the stereotyped roles she was relegated to, Wong twice fled to Europe, a sanctuary for Josephine Baker and other African American performers in similar self-exile from racism at home. The European response to Wong couldn't be more different than that of Hollywood. The multilingual



Wong stole the show in E.A. Dupont's *Piccadilly* (1929), starred opposite Laurence Olivier on stage in *The Circle of Chalk* (1929), and was welcomed in Europe as a respected star.



Sessue Hayakawa, whose smoldering screen presence made him the first full-fledged Asian American matinee idol, played his share of typical Oriental villains in movies like

Cecil de Mille's *The Cheat* (1915). In the 1918 *The City of Dim Faces*, Hayakawa plays Jang Lung, the half-breed son of a miscreant Chinatown businessman, Wing Lung. The unions between the Lung men and white women end badly, but Hayakawa as Jang is not purely one-dimensional. He is conflicted, torn by bigotry and the revelation of his mixed race provenance. And picture the gorgeous visage of Hayakawa and his Asian dance partner, center stage on a production still over the caption, "Chinatown learns to fox-trot." In their beauty, the cultural markings of east and west, and exoticism, the image holds all the possibilities and problematics of a dancing Nancy Kwan and Jack Soo some forty-three years later in *Flower Drum Song*. Weary of perpetual typecasting, Hayakawa formed his own independent production company, Haworth Pictures Corporation.

At the same time Hayakawa was hurtling to stardom, a Chinese immigrant named James B. Leong made his way from Shanghai to Los Angeles. There, he found production work on silent pictures at Warner Brothers, Samuel Goldwyn, Columbia Pictures, and Famous Players-Lasky Corporation. Among the items in the exhibition is a photo of Leong interpreting for Chinese extras on the set of director Park Frame's *The Pagan God* (1919). Leong went on to a career as a bit actor that spanned almost forty years. As a background player, he had nothing of the industry stature of Hayakawa.

Nevertheless, like Hayakawa, Leong also tried his hand at filmmaking and established James B. Leong Productions, otherwise known as the Wah Ming Motion Picture Company.⁹ If this February 5, 1922 write-up from the *New York Times* is any indication, Leong's ambitions were boundless: "Mr. Leong has organized this company, says the announcement, to produce 'picture-plays of, by and for the Chinese,' and 'to reclaim China from opium, gambling, superstition, ignorance and foreign prejudice by spreading the motion picture broadcast throughout that mysterious and turbulent land.'" Foreshadowing the careers of many present-day Asian American auteurs, Leong seemed to find himself in perpetual development hell. Projects such as *Eclipse of the Rising Sun* and *Traffic in Girls* never made it to the screen. He did manage to produce one film, the 1921 *Lotus Blossom*, a tale of a sacred bell and unrequited love set in China's distant past.



Chinawood, USA: The Movies Come to Chinatown

In the 1930s, a trio of far more prolific filmmakers set up shop. They were, perhaps, the first transnational Chinese American filmmakers. In 1932, Joseph Sunn Jue and his business partner, Moon Kwan Man Ching, formed the Grandview Film Company in San Francisco's Chinatown. Their debut production, *Romance of the Songsters* (1933), is known to be one of the first Cantonese language talkies. After a productive stint in Hong Kong, where they made another sixty-five films until being routed by Japan's bombing and the Pacific War, Jue came back to San Francisco. Working from a basement on Old Chinatown Lane, he opened the Grandview Theater on Jackson Street and continued to make features including the 1944 *She's My Gal*.

A story in the *San Francisco Chronicle* dated May 28, 1944¹⁰ describes a makeshift production set in a basement studio. Jue's son, Jue Mon Liang, was

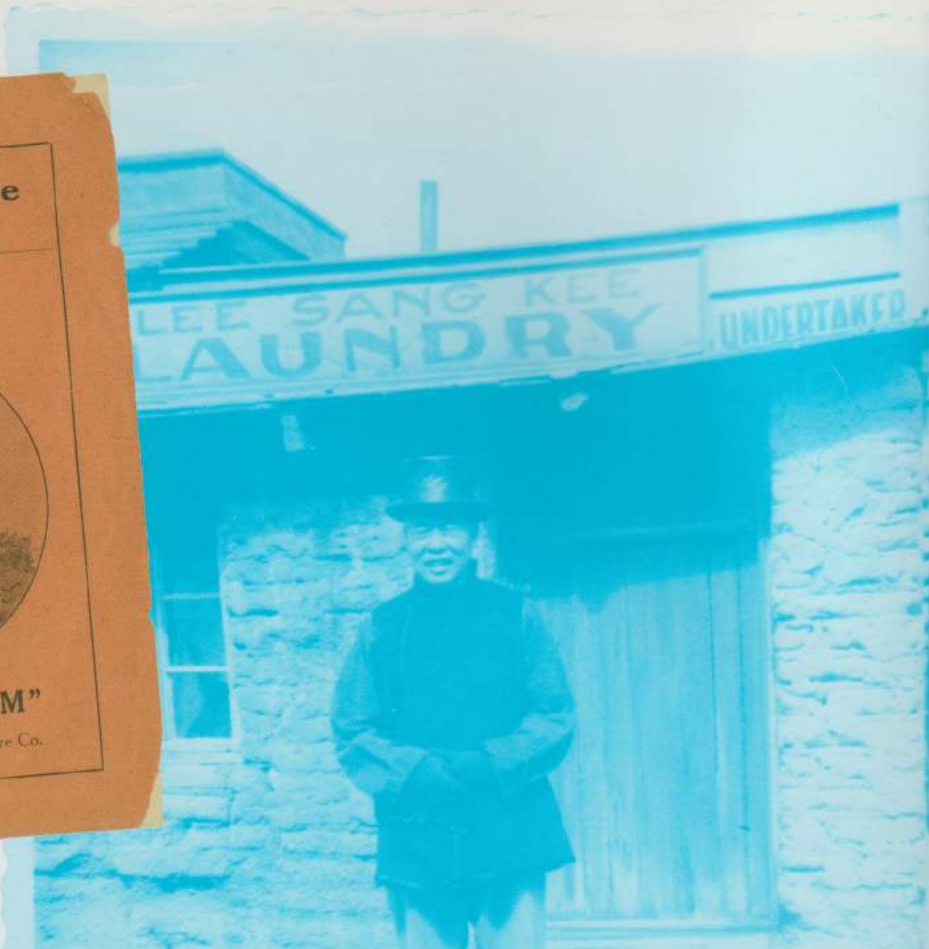
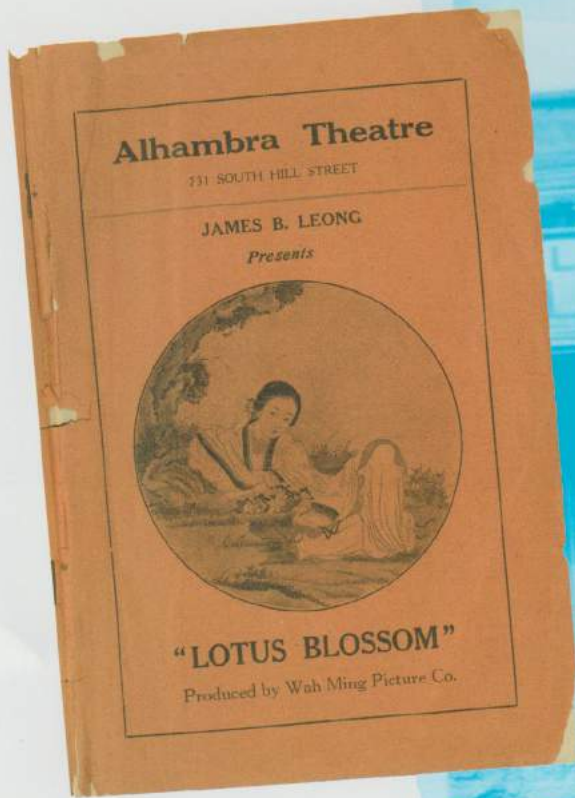
the cinematographer, moonlighting from the University of California, and all the cast kept their day jobs as well. Some of the Grandview talent went on to stardom in Hong Kong, including Wong Chew Mo and his wife Patricia Joe, also known as Chow Kun Ling. It is a pity that most, if not all, of the Grandview repertoire has been lost. Apparently, the new owner of the Grandview Theater trashed the prints when he took possession of the building in 1975.¹¹ It would have been fascinating to study the contours of representation in films made by, about, and for Chinese and Chinese Americans during that era. To what degree would they have absorbed, resisted, or dismissed western screen conventions?

Like Grandview, none of filmmaker Esther Eng's prints are known to exist. Biographical information remains sparse—it has been variously reported that she was born in Hong Kong and the United States—but what we do know is fascinating.¹² According to film historian Law Kar, Eng made her first feature in 1935 in San Francisco, *Heartache*,

TOP (l-r): Grandview Film Company's *She's My Gal* (1944), with (l-r) Wong Chew Mo and Chow Kun Ling; and *Black Market Bride* (1948), with (l-r) Wong Hock Sing, Leung Bik Yuk (woman in three different poses), Wong Hock Sing, Liu Kei Wai, others unidentified. BOTTOM (l-r): James B. Leong's *Lotus Blossom* (1921), with Lady Tsen Mei, and *Eclipse of the Rising Sun* (year unknown).



OPPOSITE: TOP: James B. Leong (center) serves as an interpreter on the set of *The Pagan God* (1919). INSET: Sessue Hayakawa in *The City of Dim Faces* (1918), caption reads: "Chinatown learns to fox-trot"



released in Hong Kong as *Iron Blood, Beautiful Soul*. The story of a patriotic Chinese woman pilot starred the actress Fung Wai Kim, who was Eng's frequent collaborator and reputedly her romantic partner. Eng made films in Hong Kong as well, but returned to San Francisco during the Pacific War. She made two pictures with Grandview, *The Fair Lady by the Blue Lagoon* (1949) and *Golden Gate Girl* (1941), the latter featuring a baby boy and future star, Bruce Lee.

Chinese American audiences were sufficient to keep the Grandview Film Company in business.

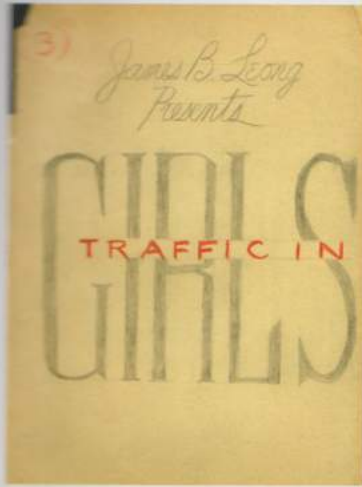
Despite exclusionary immigration laws, Chinese communities sustained during the early twentieth century, with most of the population congregated into Chinatowns. By an ironic twist of nature and fate, the great 1906 earthquake and fires in San Francisco destroyed all records of Chinese men living in the city. With no documentation to contradict them, Chinese men could now claim citizenship and bring over “paper sons and

daughters” from China to join them in the United States. As the legal scholar Bill Ong Hing points out, thousands more Chinese women crossed illegally into the United States through Canada and Mexico, prompting the creation of the Border Patrol and the infamous Angel Island detention center. Nativist violence and anti-immigration laws were effective, to a point. By 1940, a few years before the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943, the

Chinese population in the United States had crept back up to approximately the same numbers as the year it was enacted.¹³

San Francisco's Chinese quarter was *the* Chinatown, the largest and most storied in the American imagination. According to historian Judy Yung,





TOP (clockwise, l-r): Cover for James B. Leong's *Traffic in Girls* script (year unknown); *Captured in Chinatown* (1935); *Shadows Over Chinatown* (1946).

OPPOSITE (l-r): Program cover for *Lotus Blossom* (Los Angeles, 1921); James B. Leong (year unknown). INSET: Grandview Theater lobby card display for Esther Eng's *Golden Gate Girl* (1941, photo dated 1944), San Francisco Chinatown.



after the 1906 earthquake, local white oligarchs tried to relocate the demolished old Chinatown to mudflats on the peripheries of town.¹⁴ Chinese businessmen lobbied to retain a central city location and hired white architects to rebuild Chinatown with tourist-friendly, Chinese style facades. Non-Chinese were both drawn to and repelled by the place. The lanterns, pagodas, and undulating eaves signaled the alien and dangerous, as in the shrouded backdrop of the poster for *I Cover Chinatown* or the exotic and the fantastic promised by the candy-colored skyline of *Flower Drum Song*.

The *Hollywood Chinese* exhibition presents a snapshot of these two faces of Chinatowns during the years leading up to World War II. The 1935 *Captured in Chinatown* lobby card is a telling tableau: the color, the costumes, a white woman in distress, and the hint of romance and murder. Whereas Chinatowns were working class communities of small businesses and low-wage laborers, the photo vignettes on movie publicity materials are populated with people who seem to be dressed for an audience with the emperor. Weapons, whether guns or daggers, are omnipresent, and the depravity of the place is a common theme.

If the shadowy visual motifs prevalent on screen and promotional materials are not sufficiently interminable, the 1946 Charlie Chan installment makes it abundantly clear with its title, *Shadows Over Chinatown*. Some forty years later, that duality is made literal in *Big Trouble in Little China* (1986), which depicts the social geography of Chinatown as innocuous on the surface, but below ground, it is a den of iniquity. Stereotypes, like diamonds, are forever.



TOP: *The Good Earth* (1962 reissue poster). BOTTOM: *The Good Earth* casting memo (Dec. 10, 1935). Notes on Anna May Wong reads: "A little disappointing as to looks. Does not seem beautiful enough to make Wang's infatuation convincing...."

OPPOSITE: TOP (l-r): Harold Lloyd (center) in *Welcome Danger* (1929), a film that angered Chinese officials with its caricatures; French poster for *Big Trouble in Little China* (1986); *Chinatown Squad* (1935). BOTTOM (l-r): Myrna Loy as the daughter of Fu Manchu in *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932); Warner Oland (center) with his on-screen Chinese family in *Charlie Chan's Greatest Chase* (1933).

Good Earth, Bad Makeup

The actors who populated this cinematic landscape were often non-Asians in Orientalist caricature, or yellowface. Both white and, as historian Krystyn R. Moon has reported, African American performers first mimicked Asians in yellowface in the minstrel shows of the 1800s.¹⁵ To contemporary eyes, the various faux Asian faces that inhabit the exhibition are laughable, but there was a time when even the most beloved actors seem to have regarded yellowface as credible as Shakespeare—Myrna Loy (who repeatedly bested Anna May Wong for Asian roles), Edward G. Robinson, and Peter Sellers. Today, even Jack Black has a star vehicle as an anthropomorphized, yellowvoiced kung fu panda.

The iconic Anna May Wong was famously turned down for the lead role of O-Lan in the 1937 blockbuster, *The Good Earth*. Luise Rainer got the part, and went on to earn an Academy Award® for Best Actress. One obstacle was the Motion Picture Production Code, or Hayes Code, enacted in 1930 but not enforced until 1934, which for a time forbade interracial marriage in movies.

In the tortured logic of anti-miscegenation, Wong could not play the wife of a white actor who

was playing a Chinese character, Paul Muni as O-Lan's husband, Wang Lung. Wong was also considered for the role of Wang Lung's concubine, Lotus. In an almost inconceivable memo from associate producer Albert Lewin, Anna May Wong is judged "A little disappointing as to looks. Does not seem beautiful enough to make Wang's infatuation convincing...." According to other accounts, the outspoken Wong herself rejected the role of Lotus, telling producer Irving Thalberg, "If you let me play O-Lan, I will be very glad. But you're asking me—with Chinese blood—to do the only unsympathetic role in the picture featuring an all-American cast portraying Chinese characters."¹⁶

The Hayes Code may also be a reason that, during the anti-miscegenation period of the code,

INTER-OFFICE COMMUNICATION	
To:	Waters, Saltsitz, Fernald, Gray, Orangel and
Subject:	THE GOOD EARTH - casts 1934
From:	ALBERT LEWIN
Date:	December 10, 1935
John Ford:	Not good type for casting the conventional speech, but might be used for some exciting bit.
Anna May Wong:	A little disappointing as to looks. Does not seem beautiful enough to make Wang's infatuation convincing however, deserves consideration.
Ilse Lee:	Impossible.
George Halecki:	Impossible for older son. Not convincingly Chinese.
Dr. King:	Monophony only. Impossible as older son. Speech not very good.



there is a marked absence of white encounters with Asian male sexual menace and female courtesans. In the memorabilia exhibited, there is instead the startling appearance of real Asian-to-Asian couples, such as Keye Luke and Lotus Long in the photo and poster for *The Phantom of Chinatown* (1940). Somehow Charlie Chan managed to squeak by. In several of the Chan films and in a 1933 production still from *Charlie Chan's Greatest Case*, Warner Oland is the sole white actor among a populous Chan screen family, Mrs. Chan and children all played by Asian actors.

The Good Earth has long been a particular irritant to Asian Americans because of its prominence as a yellowface star vehicle. It is, however, elevated by the relative complexity of emotion, character, and plot, that is, the dimensionality that went missing in most Asian

themed movies of the time. Timing certainly played a role as China's image was undergoing a period of rehabilitation in the United States when *The Good Earth* was produced. And the film's provenance is impeccable. The story of the epic struggles of a Chinese peasant family was based on the Pulitzer Prize winning novel by author Pearl S. Buck. Raised in China by missionary parents, Buck made a career of defining China at a time when no ethnic Chinese expert was considered credible. It was Buck who first insisted on an all-Chinese cast for the film version. She had not yet won her Nobel Prize by the time the film was released, but one can only guess whether or not the honor would have carried weight with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer head, Louis B. Mayer. Apparently his reaction to the pitch was: "Who wants to see a picture about Chinese farmers?"¹⁷





Luisa Rainer as O'lan, wife of Wang Lung.



Paul Muni, Luisa Rainer and Director Sidney Franklin, seated for lunch during noon hour.



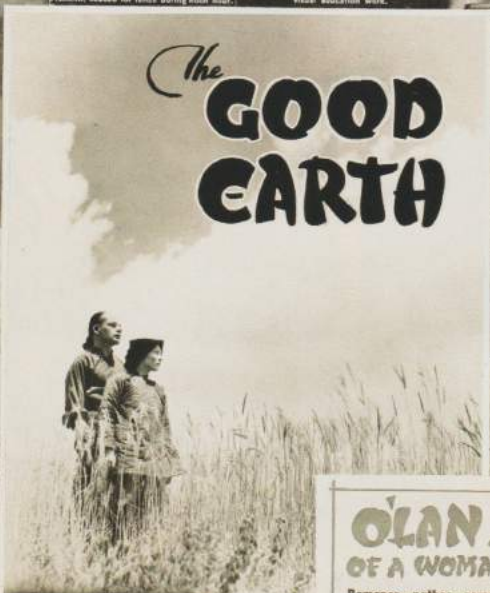
Karl Freund, cameraman, and Luisa Rainer chat with Lewis Levin, famous educator and leader in "visual" education work.



Luisa Rainer chatting with General Theodore Tu, technical expert, during a lull between scenes.



Luisa Rainer sits for makeup repairs before scenes.



Mary Garden, the grand opera star, visits Luisa Rainer on location.

Wang Lung and O'lan. One of the beautiful moments with Paul Muni and Luisa Rainer on the great farmland's location.

O'LAN... THE LIFE OF A WOMAN OF CHINA

Romance, pathos, comedy and drama are all woven into the vivid story of womanhood that is the character of O'lan, the wife of Wang Lung the farmer, in Pearl S. Buck's epic novel. This character is caught and brought to life by Luisa Rainer in Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's "The Good Earth." Laboring side by side with her husband in the fields, watching over his household, the days of a Chinese farm woman are vividly brought to the screen by the Viennese actress. Highlights of her portrayal of the woman whose work is never done are seen in the photos here, together with some sidelights and interludes.



Luisa Rainer, in the makeup chair of Cecil Holland, is transformed into an Oriental for the role of O'lan.



Paul Muni and Luisa Rainer watching crowd action from a position outside the camera angle, during farm location work.



Luisa Rainer, as the farmer's wife, does irrigation work under the eyes of the cameras.



Luisa Rainer caught in the mosh of 1,000 in the listing of the palace, a spectacular and dramatic incident in "The Good Earth."



Paul Muni and Luisa Rainer labor on a hillside slope on their farm.



TOP: Postcard for San Francisco's Forbidden City Nightclub, which marketed an all-Chinese revue (ca. 1940s). INSET: On location with Luise Rainer and her on-screen baby, Betty Soo Hoo Wong, in *The Good Earth* (1937).

OPPOSITE: TOP: Lobby card for *The Good Earth*, featuring General Theodore Tu, the film's Chinese technical advisor (upper right corner), and make-up artist Cecil Holland preparing Luise Rainer (bottom left corner). BOTTOM (l-r): The Screen Actors Guild's Chinese Actors Group, with Bessie Loo, Hollywood agent for Asian talent, seated on the left at the center table (1937); Roland Lui, Keye Luke, Luise Rainer, and Walter Connolly in *The Good Earth*.



MGM did have to contend with state intervention by the Chinese Nationalist government and its censors. Hollywood's dismal track record of Chinese screen images had not gone unnoticed at the capital in Nanking. At one point, the Chinese were so incensed by the caricatures in Harold Lloyd's *Welcome Danger* (1929) that the government banned all his films from distribution. Some officials considered aspects of Buck's novel to be derogatory and demanded various preconditions, such as government-sanctioned technical advisors, before agreeing to allow any filming on location in China. China has continued to practice control over foreign production, regardless of regime. Fifty years after *The Good Earth*, producer Raffaella De Laurentiis was embroiled in legendary battles with the People's Republic of China government over the screen version of James Clavell's epic, *Tai-Pan* (1986).



More recently, Wayne Wang had to forego financing from China for *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (2007) when he refused to change one line in the script, and Ang Lee agreed to shave sex scenes from *Lust, Caution* (2007) for the version distributed on the mainland.

Nevertheless, a number of Chinese American actors were cast in *The Good Earth*, a rare opportunity to play against the typical caricature. Keye Luke, the perpetual Number One Son of Charlie Chan fame, played the supporting lead as the Elder Son alongside Roland Lui, Richard Loo, filmmaker/actor James B. Leong, Bessie Loo, the future Hollywood agent to Asian American actors, and Chester Gan, who assisted in the Chinese casting of the film. Many of the performers, no doubt, are pictured in the remarkable 1937 group portrait of the Chinese American Actors Group, a caucus of the Screen Actors Guild. Despite the paucity of good roles, film work did exist, and in San Francisco's Chinatown, there was a sizzling nightclub scene featuring Asian American entertainers. The epicenter was Charlie Low's Forbidden City.

That Oriental Feeling

It was the Asian American version of Harlem's Cotton Club, featuring the Chinese Frank Sinatra, the Chinese Fred and Ginger, ad infinitum. During the 1940s and 50s, San Francisco's Forbidden City Nightclub led the pack of clubs and cabarets where white tourists and servicemen to/from the Pacific War could prowl the Chinatown night. Memorialized by Arthur Dong in his 1989 documentary, *Forbidden City, U.S.A.*, and mimicked in the hit Broadway musical and 1961 movie, *Flower Drum Song*, the Forbidden City Nightclub advertised an

EDWARD G. ROBINSON

LORETTA YOUNG

HE KILLS!!

SHE THRILLS!

"THE
Hatchet
Man"

RACKETEERS VS. THE TONGS
IN FRISCO'S CHINATOWN WAR!

Directed by WILLIAM A. WELLMAN • A WARNER BROS. PRESENTATION



all-Chinese revue of singers, dancers, and jokesters. Asian American entertainers could finally show their stuff, but within the expectations of the times. Headliners were promoted as Chinese versions of mainstream stars, or what Cultural Studies critic Anthony W. Lee has dubbed "racial cross-dressing."¹⁸ Still, like the architecture of Chinatown, the exoticism of the East remained a part of the show: the seductive Asian women wearing over-the-top Chinoiserie if wearing anything, the Little Egypt bellydancer, and Jack Mei Ling's harem master shtick. It was an Orientalist delight.

There is nothing innocuous or coincidental about the conflation of the Asian and the Arab in one murky and alien cultural landscape. As the Palestinian American theorist, Edward Said, has argued in his influential book, *Orientalism*, attributes of difference have always marked the Oriental subject: "For Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')."¹⁹ Strange, governable, expendable. In the Hollywood vision of Orientalism, the screen characterizations of Arab and Asian villainy are almost interchangeable evil twins. It is the idea of the perpetual foreigner, whether cloaked in daggers or slit-to-the-thigh *cheongsams*.

In Jack G. Shaheen's study, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2001), the similarities to Asian archetypes are startling. His descriptions of lascivious sheikhs and Bedouins are

TOP-BOTTOM: Cold War sentiments are reflected in the posters for *China Venture* (1953) and *Passport to China* (1961). BACKGROUND: Design derived from poster for *Passport to China*.

OPPOSITE (l-r): *The Hatchet Man* (1932); *To the Ends of the Earth* (1948), with Signe Hasso, Dick Powell, and Maylia.

transposable to any number of Asian male screen counterparts. The implicit sexual menace of a yellowfaced Edward G. Robinson as a tong hatchet man looming over a woman on the movie's poster ("He Kills!! She Thrills!"), mirrors the rape fantasies of a leering Arab clutching actress Louise Lorraine in the 1930 *The Jade Box*. Arab female love interests share a high mortality rate with their Chinese equivalents. Compare the deathly fates of Anna May Wong in *The Toll of the Sea* and Priscilla Dean's half-Arab maiden in *Under Two Flags* that same year (1922). Love never hurt this much. Anna May Wong herself was a double-crossing Mongol slave girl in *The Thief of Bagdad* and an evil Arab slave girl in *Chu Chin Chow* (1934).

To be sure, the idea of a yellow peril, allied to an axis of evil, is a regular trope in American movies. Take Robert Stevenson's 1948 film, *To the Ends of the Earth*. In the convoluted story, Dick Powell plays a federal agent up against a malevolent web of depravity: human traffickers from China in league with Egyptian poppy growers and a narcotics refinery in Cuba thrown in for size. The kingpin of the global drug ring? The guileless-looking Shu Pan Yu, played by the diminutive Detroit-born Chinese American actress, Maylia, who is pictured in the movie still here. Fast forward to the 1994 Arnold Schwarzenegger pre-gubernatorial vehicle, *True Lies*. This time, the dragon lady is Juno Skinner (Tia Carrere), a racially ambiguous seductress who is in league with an Arab oil tycoon to supply nuclear warheads to a Palestinian terrorist cell.





Blasting the Bamboo Curtain

The force of geopolitics in the movies was never so potent as in America's two mid-century conflicts, World War II and the Cold War. From 1942 to 1945, Hollywood and the US government's Office of War Information (OWI) entered into an unprecedented alliance to produce propaganda films to aid the war effort. The OWI was not solely concerned with making the bad guys look like bad guys. They aimed to sell American ideals of a colorblind democracy,²⁰ despite its dismal record of Jim Crow laws, Japanese American concentration camps, and numerous other inequalities languishing at home. Ironically, Japan had already played the race card in the 1930s as it peddled the idea of Manchuria to subjugated Japanese Americans using rhetoric of a pan-Asian, anti-colonialist utopia based on the principal of "harmony among five races."²¹

The United States had other problems selling the picture of racial equality within its borders. For one thing, who could tell the Asians apart, even with visual aids like *LIFE* magazine's "How to Tell Japs from the Chinese?"²² In *The Purple Heart* (1944), all of the Japanese parts were played by Chinese actors, including Richard Loo, who made a career performing as Japanese villains. There would not have been many Japanese American actors around Hollywood anyway. They were either forcibly expelled from the West Coast, enlisted with the US armed forces, or as with some of the talent at the Forbidden City Nightclub in San Francisco,



L-R: *The Purple Heart* (1944), with Farley Granger and Richard Loo (right) who made a career performing Japanese villains in World War II era films; *China's Little Devils* (1945).

OPPOSITE: Ronald Reagan and Danny Chang in *Hong Kong* (1952); Mexican lobby card for *Hong Kong*.

passed for Chinese. The *LIFE* magazine photo spread, coupled with the vision of non-Japanese Asians donning "I Am Chinese" buttons, would be pure camp but for the fact that the Orientalist impulse can be a matter of life and death. Witness the 1982 murder of Vincent Chin, mistaken for Japanese, and Balbir Sodhi, a turbaned Indian Sikh who was shot to death by a man who mistook him for Middle Eastern in the days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001.

War era movies had to make the case for the Asian as simultaneous enemy and democracy-loving Mini-me's. The 1945 propaganda film, *China's Little Devils*, takes the notion of the little yellow brother quite literally. Ducky L. Louie plays Little Butch, a Chinese orphan who is rescued by Flying Tigers pilot Big Butch Dooley (Harry Carey). Louie's dominance on the movie poster, armed and triumphant before a blaze of glory—not to mention the huge type size of his credit—is evidence that something has changed in screenland. The yellow peril has morphed into the great yellow hope. Ducky is living the dream, although in the movie, he doesn't live it for long. Little Butch leads a commando troop of refugee children to fight the Japanese (Richard Loo here again as a Japanese colonel). Little Butch and his fellow boy soldiers repay their debt to Big Butch and the cause with their own lives. Different, governable, expendable.

Seven years later, in Paramount's *Hong Kong* (1952), little Danny Chang's character, Wei Lin, is





L-R: *LIFE* cover, caption reads: "Nancy Kwan: A New Star as Suzie Wong" (Oct. 24, 1960); *China Doll* (1958). BACKGROUND: Design derived from *LIFE* cover.

OPPOSITE, LEFT COLUMN: William Holden appeared with a succession of Chinese female characters in (top-bottom) *The Devil Never Sleeps* aka *Satan Never Sleeps* (1962), *The World of Suzie Wong* (soundtrack LP, 1960), and *Love Is a Many Splendored Thing* (Mexican lobby card, 1955).

an ideological twin to Little Butch. Only this time the enemies are "Red Chinese" and the hero is an anti-hero. Ronald Reagan plays Jeff Williams, a dissolute ex-GI who only reluctantly saves Wei Lin after a Communist air assault—Reagan's paternal pose on the movie still notwithstanding. As for the marketing of the film in Mexico, it may be the fickle imaginary of Hollywood geopolitics—or perhaps the exhibitors there didn't get the memo—but the malevolent Chinese villains on the lobby card for the movie look like they've slithered out of a Frank Miller graphic novel.

Kiss of Death

Meanwhile, the Japanese were experiencing their own screen rehabilitation as the doctrinal fault lines shifted from World War II's axis of evil to the Communist threat. In films like *Sayonara* (1957) and *Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956), both set in postwar Japan, there is reconciliation and even love between occupier and occupied. In *Sayonara* the old boogey man of intermarriage is portrayed, but also critiqued. I don't know if this is a sign of racial progress, but increasingly on screen, the death sentence for interracial love is not borne by the Asian woman alone. When airman Joe Kelly (Red Buttons) and his bride Katsumi (Miyoshi Umeki) confront personal and official bigotry, they make a suicide pact. By contrast, the 1958 *China Doll* is a virtual miscegenation blood bath. Set during World War II, it is the story of a fateful union between



Shu-Jen (Li Li Hua), a castoff of war, and her accidental lover, Captain Cliff Brandon (Victor Mature). By the end of the credits almost all the leads seem to have met their maker. Shu-Jen, however, may have endured the harsher fate of having had sex with Captain Cliff in his (no doubt sweaty) delirium of a malaria attack. In the end, their baby, and by implication the alliance, lives on.

As miscegenationists go, William Holden takes the crown. He, and his costar Nancy Kwan, have become iconic for their painter meets bar girl classic, *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960). The film, and *Flower Drum Song* a year later, vaulted Nancy Kwan into international stardom as the first Asian woman sex symbol since Anna May Wong. Holden himself had quite a hot run with the Asian ladies in Cold War movies during the 1950s and 60s: he plays opposite Jennifer Jones as the white knight²³ to the Eurasian Dr. Han Suyin in *Love Is a Many Splendored Thing* (1955); Frances Nguyen's character Siu Lan loves Holden's Catholic Father O'Banion, but ends up marrying her Chinese



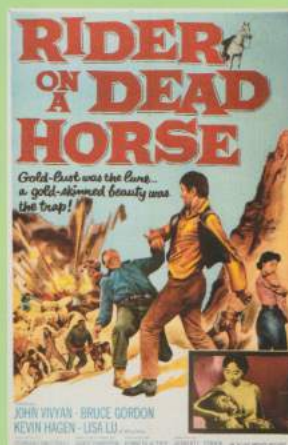
EAST MEETS WESTERN

CURATOR'S NOTE: Since the beginning of cinema, Westerns have been a staple of American films, often telling stories of adventure, personal freedom, and the conquest of the frontier and its indigenous peoples. While Hollywood studios in the 1960s kept the genre alive with popular fare like *Cat Ballou* (1965), *The Wild Bunch* (1969), and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), the 60s also ushered in the Civil Rights Movement. Race issues captured the nation's attention, and likewise filmmakers who incorporated social concerns into their work. During my research for *Hollywood Chinese*, I discovered at least two lower budget Westerns that focused on Chinese characters in racial strife. Their political messages were rightly contemporary, particularly since films like *The Vengeance of Fu Manchu* (1967) were more the norm for the period. Unfortunately, despite their progressive social messages, these films are largely forgotten and out of circulation.

Walk Like a Dragon (1960), right, starred James Shigeta (*Flower Drum Song* [1961], *Crimson Kimono* [1959]) as a proud Chinese immigrant laborer in the 1870s who resists racist attitudes surrounding him. In the film, he fights for and gets the Chinese slave girl played by Japanese American actress, Nobu McCarthy.

Rider on a Dead Horse (1962), right, starred Lisa Lu (*The Joy Luck Club* [1993], *The Mountain Road* [1960]) as a railroad laborer who sets out to San Francisco by any means necessary in order to find more lucrative work as a call girl(?!). On the way, Lu gets tangled in sordid schemes for gold and spits out feisty lines like, "Yellow man, white man, red man, all the same...you men all the same, think you're better than woman."

The McMasters (1970), below, does not specifically explore Chinese themes or characters, but it does feature Nancy Kwan in a departure from her more glamorous sex-kitten roles. Kwan gets down and dirty, and portrays a Native American given away by her family to Brock Peters, an African American who, after serving the North in the Civil War, returns to his southern hometown populated by angry racist citizens. — AD





TOP-BOTTOM: *Flower Drum Song* (1961) lobby card, with (l-r) Jack Soo, Nancy Kwan, Miyoshi Umeki, and James Shigeta; *Flower Drum Song* lobby card, with Nancy Kwan and Patrick Adiarte; Belgium poster for *Flower Drum Song*.



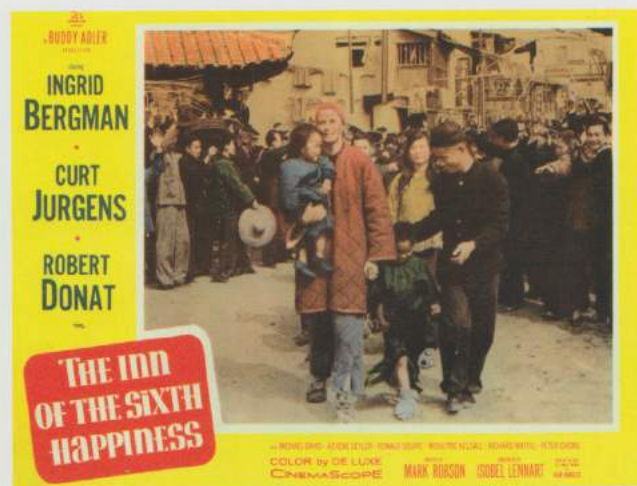
OPPOSITE: Lobby cards for *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* (1958), which featured Ingrid Bergman as a missionary in China. Tsai Chin, who starred as the daughter of Fu Manchu in a series of films during the 1960s and as Lindo in *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), can be seen in the far right card immediately behind Bergman.

BACKGROUND (pages 24 and 25): Design derived from a Mexican lobby card for *Flower Drum Song*.



Communist rapist in *Satan Never Sleeps* aka *The Devil Never Sleeps* (1962); and in the 1964 *Seventh Dawn*, Holden is a Malaysian plantation owner whose life is torn by Communist insurgents and two women, Candace (Susannah York) and Dhana (the model/actress Capucine in yellowface). The body count? This time the Asian women fare better, only Dhana dies. Holden's character Mark Eliot doesn't survive *Love Is a Many Splendored Thing*, and as a priest in *Satan Never Sleeps* he is killed off without the benefit of ever getting laid.

Although these white male/Asian female couplings have been the screen norm, in the 1958 *Inn of the Sixth Happiness*, Ingrid Bergman's maid-turned-missionary, Gladys Aylward, falls in love with a Eurasian officer, Captain Lin Nan. Casting for the captain, MGM erred on the European side of the equation and chose the German-Austrian actor Curt Jurgens. Needless to say, Lin dies in the end. But the real romance here might be America's nostalgia for a China before Chairman Mao.²⁴ In the lobby card, Bergman is the white savior leading, and towering over, the pre-revolutionary Chinese peasantry in a struggle against tradition (foot-binding), corruption, and the Japanese. Aylward's beneficence is an apt metaphor for America's use of soft power to fight the Cold War, that is, selling the ideals of a liberal democracy as



a conduit to the hearts and minds of Asia. And that road also led back to Chinese America.

I Enjoy Being a Gweilo: Enter the Model Minority

In 1952, during the midst of the Korean War and at the height of the Red Scare, a Chinese American laundry owner named Toy Len Goon was crowned the American Mother of the Year. If there was ever a mother of all model minorities, Mrs. Goon was it.

News of the hard-working Portland, Maine laundry woman and mother of eight was not only reported for American consumption. After the Chinese Communist victory of 1949, the State Department-run Voice of America hired Betty Lee Sung to broadcast a show called *Chinese Activities* to Asian radio listeners. Sung's goal of countering anti-Chinese stereotypes with stories of positive role models, such as Toy Len Goon, coincided with the State Department's strategic interests. The United States was concerned that racial inequality at home was blunting its message of democracy over communism. Just as African American jazz musicians performed around the world as defacto Cold War emissaries, the writer Jade Snow Wong (*Fifth Chinese Daughter*, 1950) and artist Dong Kingman (who painted the film titles for *Flower Drum Song*) were enlisted by the State Department to tour Asia as cultural diplomats and exemplars of equal opportunity.²⁵

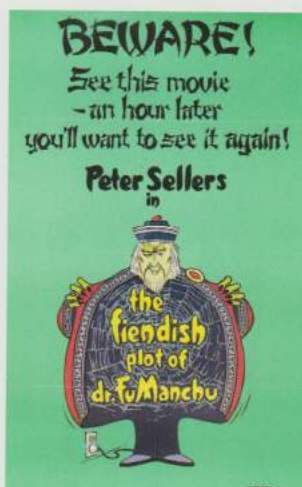
The model minority was the stateside cousin to Cold War Orientalism. As Robert G. Lee describes it: "Three specters haunted Cold War America in the 1950s: the red menace of communism, the black menace of race mixing, and the white menace of homosexuality."²⁷ The idea of the self-sufficient, adaptable, and traditional Asian family, the Toy Len Goons of America, was a comfort during an age of paranoia driven by perceived threats to nationhood. Long before the Cold War, the assimilable Charlie Chan had already begun his long tenure as the precursor to the hard-working, obedient, vaguely Confucian archetypal model minority. Purportedly created in 1919 by author Earl Derr Biggers as an antidote to Fu Manchu and the yellow peril stereotypes, the Charlie Chan stories first appeared on screen in 1925. Charlie Chan was plump, asexual, non-threatening, and a disappointment at the box office when he was initially played by Japanese Americans George Kuwa and Kamiyama Sojin, and Korean American E.L. Park. In the appropriately titled, *Charlie Chan Carries On* (1931), a yellowfaced Warner Oland took over as the inscrutable detective followed by Sidney Toler and others.²⁸ The franchise survived long enough for Charlie to fight opium rings, Nazis, and to snoop for the Secret Service.

Even as Chinatown activists were hounded by anti-communist witch hunts and US-China relations was setting into a deep freeze, the 1961 film, *Flower Drum Song*, offered a revamped and stir-fried version of the hyphenated Chinese-American family,

L-R: *The Fiendish Plot of Dr. Fu Manchu* (1980); Mexican lobby card for *The Terror of the Tongs* (1961).

OPPOSITE: Martial arts films cross borders and genres (l-r): Turkish poster for *Enter the Dragon* (1973); Pakistani poster for *The Big Brawl* (1980); *Kung Fu Panda* (2008); *Mulan* (1998).

BACKGROUND (pages 26 and 27): Design derived from the Turkish poster for *Enter the Dragon*.



a palatable dish for American consumption. *Flower Drum Song* has always been a guilty pleasure for Asian Americans. We love the camp of this imagined Chinatown, populated by gorgeous singing and dancing Asian Americans in the dreamscape of Master Wang's palatial digs and Sammy Fong's Celestial Gardens. The virginal illegal immigrant Mei Li (Miyoshi Umeki) and nightclub stripper Linda Low (Nancy Kwan in the film version) may dangle along the Lotus Blossom-Dragon Lady continuum,²⁹ but they were also simply fabulous at a time when being Asian American and female meant being un-hip and unlovely.

As film scholar Peter X. Feng points out, stereotypes may be static but the way we view them are always in flux.³⁰ Now looking back in the rearview mirror of screen culture, I can appreciate how the actors of *Flower Drum Song* maneuvered within the racial straitjacket of the time.³¹ Indeed, with powers rivaling Fu Manchu's Elixir Vitae, the Hollywood movie machine has regenerated screen caricatures with amazing resilience. In 1961, the same year that *Flower Drum Song* danced into the hearts of moviegoers, Columbia Pictures released the antediluvian *Terror of the Tongs* (*El Terror de la Mafia China*). The Mexican lobby card's Fu Manchu figure, hatchet man, dragon, and the come hither women, all seem like a throwback from another time, but the stain of Orientalism has never been fully erased. A year after Peter Sellers' 1980 star turn as Fu Manchu, the venerable two-time Academy Award® winner Peter Ustinov reprised

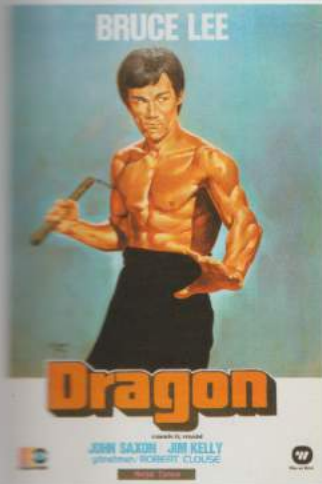
Charlie Chan. Today, you can battle Chinese triads and tongs in the various versions of *Grand Theft Auto*. Self-determined Asian screen portrayals were almost negligible for most of the twentieth century. Asian American film talent before and behind the screen only appeared in fits and starts for almost six decades after Marion Wong first gazed into the camera lens.

But then came Bruce Lee.

It Started With Bruce

Indian-born Vijay Prashad was a kid at a Calcutta movie house when he first experienced Bruce Lee's breakout film and Hollywood debut, *Enter the Dragon* (1973): "There was something extraordinary about Bruce Lee...Bruce stood his ground against corruption of all forms, including the worst of the Asian bourgeoisie, Mr. Han. With his bare fists and his *nunchakus*, Bruce provided young people with the sense that we, like the Vietnamese guerrillas, could be victorious against the virulence of international capitalism. He seemed invincible."³²

Prashad, now a Cultural Studies scholar, is one of the new generation of theorists who have looked at Bruce Lee's impact on the consciousness of young, 1970s era activists from Hong Kong to Chinatown, J-Town to Harlem. His description of the shock of discovery at a Calcutta theater mirrors my own. I was awed but ambivalent about the spectacle of Asian martial arts heroes at the old



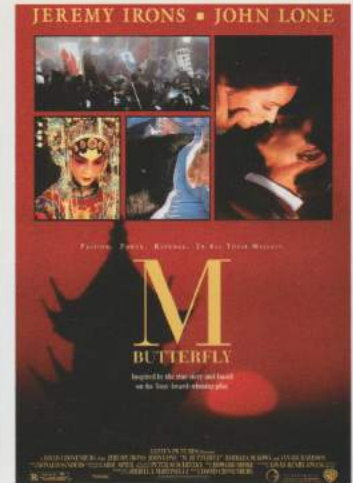
Cinema 21 in my Pasadena, California neighborhood, which otherwise hosted blaxploitation and second run fare. Many Asian Americans who came of age during the 1970s were torn between pride and trepidation. The martial arts phenomenon manufactured new stereotypes even as it detonated old ones, but the political undertones of Bruce Lee's movies and career were irresistible. Lee resisted hierarchy and ethnocentrism in kung fu, and teamed up on screen with African American martial artists including Jim Kelly and Kareem Abdul Jabbar. We now know that Lee resented racist production practices in Hollywood and fought back. Like MGM's rejection of Anna May for the lead in *The Son-Daughter* (1932) for being "too Chinese," Lee lost the starring role of the TV series *Kung Fu* (1972-75) for the identical reason. He seethed at Chinese caricatures, and so in his own movies, embodied a people's hero. Films like *Chinese Connection* (1972), an anti-Japanese imperialist fable, spoke to nationalist fervor at home in Hong Kong and abroad. Musician Fred Ho may have best summed up Lee's appeal with the title of his article on Black Power, aesthetics, and Asian martial arts: "Kickin' the White Man's Ass."³³

Better Luck Today

I've had two more "aha" moments of discovery watching Chinese American feature films since that matinee at the Cinema 21. The first was 1981 in a makeshift screening room at the old Collective for Living Cinema loft in downtown Manhattan. I was

there for a first glimpse at a new, decidedly low-budget feature, *Chan Is Missing*, by an experimental filmmaker and occasional Hong Kong soap opera director named Wayne Wang. *Chan Is Missing* is waiting for Godot as noirish, neo-realist road trip. A middle-aged cabbie named Jo (Wood Moy) and his wise-cracking, young ABC sidekick Steve (Marc Hayashi) search the back streets of San Francisco's Chinatown for their elusive friend, Chan Hung. Wang once worked as a social worker in Chinatown, and his keen eye for the nuances, absurdities, and humanity of the place makes for a vision of inventive familiarity. These are people we know: the short-order cook in the "Samurai Night Fever" t-shirt (actor/director Peter Wang), the manong dancing at a Manilatown senior center, and poet Presco Tabios as himself.

If there was any Chan missing here, it was Charlie. The movie's originality, rooted deeply in real Asian American life, and profitable to boot, signaled an imminent future. Asian American feature filmmaking in the early 1980s was crackling with promise. Ang Lee was at NYU film school where he crewed on Spike Lee's thesis project, *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads* (1983). Mira Nair was directing her first documentaries, playwright David Henry Hwang launched his Chinese American trilogy with *FOB*, and Robert Nakamura and Duane Kubo wrapped *Hito Hata: Raise the Banner* (1980), one of the first Japanese American features. Joan Chen, who just won China's Hundred Flowers Award for Best Actress for her role in *The Little Flower* (1980), migrated to the United States where she would soon



land roles in Genny Lim's PBS production of *Paper Angels* (1985) and in *Tai-Pan*.

Some twenty years later I was at the Los Angeles Asian Pacific American Film Festival to see *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002), the breakout feature by a young, Taiwan-born, California-raised filmmaker. Justin Lin was trained at UCLA by Robert Nakamura among others and, like Wayne Wang, once spent time doing Asian American community work. Lin resisted pressure from financiers to populate *Better Luck Tomorrow* with a Caucasian lead or Latino characters.³⁴ Instead he cast a pan-Asian ensemble led by Parry Shen, Jason Tobin, Sung Kang, Roger Fan, Karin Anna Cheung, and John Cho, lately of *Harold and Kumar* (2004) and *Star Trek* (2009) fame. The dark satire about a gang of morally challenged suburban overachievers is loosely based on a real case of honor students turned to murder at Sunny Hills High School, the vaunted National Merit mill in Orange County, California. The usual pastiche of teenage sex, drugs, and class conflict is reinvigorated by Lin's smart, two-pronged

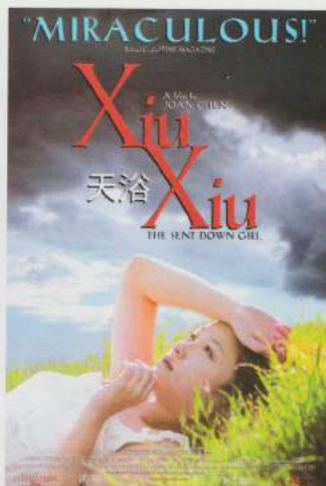
parody of racist assumptions (the Orientalist-imposed model minority myth) and racial aspirations (parentally imposed career ambitions).

The poster says it all: This is not your Daddy's model minority. His frenetic visual style has all the signifiers of the Adderall generation, but Lin is clearly also a part of a subculture of Asian American filmmakers influenced by Martin Scorsese's Italian American fictions. *Better Luck Tomorrow* made it clear that Lin possessed the holy grail of bankability, that is, a crossover aesthetic. He has been able to craft a successful career directing the teen market, *Annapolis* (2006) and two *Fast and Furious* sequels. Wayne Wang, whose Chinese American vehicles, *Dim Sum* (1985) and *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), distinguished him as a women's director, has worked with actresses Susan Sarandon, Natalie Portman, Jennifer Lopez, and shown here in the exhibition, Queen Latifah in *Last Holiday* (2006). That trajectory of light commercial fare has rankled fans of his earlier, edgier work, but Wang has returned more recently to intimate, low-budget Asian

TOP (clockwise, l-r): *Chan Is Missing* (1982); *The Joy Luck Club* (1993); *M. Butterfly* (1993), screenplay by David Henry Hwang, based on his play; Justin Lin directs James Franco in *Annapolis* (2006); Wayne Wang directs Queen Latifah in *Last Holiday* (2006).

OPPOSITE: TOP (clockwise, l-r): *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002); *Xiu Xiu: The Sent Down Girl* (1998), directed by Joan Chen; John Woo directs Tom Cruise in *Mission: Impossible 2* (2000); Ang Lee directs Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal in *Brokeback Mountain* (2005); Joan Chen directs *Autumn in New York* (2000), starring Richard Gere (right). INSET: *Souls for Sale* aka *Confessions of an Opium Eater* (1962). BACKGROUND: Design derived from poster for *Better Luck Tomorrow*.





American-themed stories with *The Princess of Nebraska* (2007)(co-directed by Richard Wong) and *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (2007). As if coming full circle, between *Fast and Furious* projects Lin produced the mockumentary, *Finishing the Game: The Search for the New Bruce Lee* (2007).



Asian American filmmaking had grown exponentially during the intervening decades between *Chan Is Missing* and *Better Luck Tomorrow*, and so had Asian America. The rise of new generations of Chinese American filmmakers was boosted by immigration reform,

the Asian American political identity movement, the rise of independent filmmaking and global cinema, and significantly, Asian American arts and media

institutions which formed in response to screen racism. The actor James Hong recalls approaching producer Albert Zugsmith to protest the production of *Confessions of an Opium Eater* aka *Souls for Sale* (1962), starring Vincent Price. The title was bad enough for Hong, but then he read the script, “I said, well, this cannot be. You know, it’s just way too ‘chinky,’ even ‘chinkier’ than the other predecessors probably.”³⁵ The movie’s poster itself is a veritable poster-child (no pun intended) for the notion of the white male gaze and the licentious Asian woman: “Men craved these exotic girls for lustful desires!” The protest to Zugsmith was futile; after all, this was the producer who gave us Charlton Heston as a brown-faced Mexican detective in Orson Welles’ 1958 *Touch of Evil*. The experience, however, inspired Hong, Japanese American actor Mako, and others to establish the pioneering theater troupe, East West Players, in 1965. Asian American media arts centers followed during the 1970s, sprouting up in metropolitan communities: Visual Communications in Los



L-R: Chinese actresses from Asia capture the lead roles in the Japanese historical drama, *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005), with Zhang Ziyi, Gong Li, and Michelle Yeoh; Hollywood finds box office gold with Hong Kong actor, Jackie Chan, in *Rush Hour* (1998). BACKGROUND: Design derived from poster for *Better Luck Tomorrow*.

OPPOSITE (l-r): Taiwanese filmmaker Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005).



Angeles' Little Tokyo district, Seattle's King Street Media, the Asian American Resource Workshop in Boston's Chinatown, Asian CineVision in New York's Chinatown, and the National Asian American Telecommunications Association (NAATA), now Center for Asian American Media (CAAM), headquartered in San Francisco.³⁶

Part of their work was media advocacy, but above all it was about creating something new. Asian American filmmaking has never been simply a reactive cinema. Take the work of Chinese American directors Wayne Wang, Justin Lin, Joan Chen, or their predecessors Marion Wong, James B. Leong, Esther Eng, and Joseph Sunn Jue. I won't venture to say there is something essentially Chinese American about their films. The point of Asian American independent film has always been its hybridity, drawn from the eclectic cultural influences that shape our lives in the United States. Look to the multiple sensibilities of Zand Gee's design for the *Chan Is Missing* poster: film noir meets Orientalia meets postmodernism, presided over by two quintessentially original Asian American characters played by Marc Hayashi and Wood Moy. In its transnationality and cultural multiplicity, Chinese American film anticipates, not follows, mainstream cinema.³⁷

Today Chinese/American cinema is global, it is hybridity on steroids. Immigrant filmmakers and imported talent still dominate Hollywood feature film production, a truism for all Asian American groups. Those filmmakers may arrive from countries with established national cinemas, without the same

baggage of race shouldered by US-born Asians. Transnational production and the massive audience pool, especially the Chinese and Indian markets, mean that Asian-themed movies can no longer be relegated purely to art house or cult status. Witness *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), and almost anything starring Jackie Chan. As the economy of production slowly changes, so does the balance of power. Sixty years after *The Purple Heart*, Chinese actresses Zhang Ziyi, Gong Li, and Michelle Yeoh were cast for major Japanese roles in *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005). But this time it wasn't politics, it was business.

Does this mean we can say goodbye to Charlie Chan and seal away Fu Manchu in his crypt?

Scholars are only beginning to cast a critical lens on video gaming and the dredging up of old stereotypes, as with *Grand Theft Auto*. And what to make of Asian complicity in creating these games? Just as the expression of race and ethnicity has become more sophisticated in films like *Better Luck Tomorrow*, it is not clear that the same can be said for standard Hollywood material. Clint Eastwood's *Grand Torino* (2008) ostensibly offers up a full menu of Asian characters. But the new dichotomy of seemingly good, white identified Hmong, and inversely black identified or culturally bad Hmong, is simply a new take on old paradigms. On the *Rush Hour* (1998) poster, Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker are identified by the racial clichés, "The fastest hands in the East...the biggest mouth in the West." In form and



substance, Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker are no Bruce Lee and Jim Kelly.

Taking the long view that this exhibition provides, the forward motion of the past hundred years is unmistakable. I was so enraptured by Ang Lee's vision of the fierce Asian women in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* that I let my three-year-old son watch it. The shock and awe of witnessing Asian female power on screen, virtually invisible when I was a child, otherwise trumped my better maternal judgment for letting a toddler view the screen carnage. Orientalism is all about defining the foreign as different from the normal/ideal. In both subtle and audacious ways, Lee's films, like *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), have helped to push those boundaries of what is considered universal. Today, unlike a previous era, talent on and off screen cannot easily be dismissed, such as Joan Chen, Justin Lin, Lucy Liu, Wayne Wang, John Woo, or the behind-the-scenes co-creators of *Watchmen* (2009), cinematographer Larry Fong, editor William Hoy, and the emerging powerhouse screenwriter, Alex Tse.

It is useful then to witness the evolution, and sometimes devolution, of screen images on the walls of this exhibition because they point to our uncertain future. Fu Manchu was born to the demise of the British Empire and survived the American century, but what portends for the emergent Chinese era? The Chinese toy and food recalls and human rights controversies culminating in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games were unsettling for Chinese and

Asian Americans. Those of us who grew up in the days when "Made in China" connoted shoddy construction were ambivalent about parsing xenophobia from legitimate criticism. But this interconnected global visual economy of clashing histories and agendas demands that we grasp the complications.

These images may be fantasies, but they are essentially political. There is a context underlying the beauties, the beasts, and the seductive atrocities of pleasure imagined in the ephemera and movie tableaux. The stereotypes of Chinese Americans may be fixed, but the visual evidence of screen resistance you see here means Chinese Americans are in constant movement. If this were a night at the Chinese American Museum, you might imagine Marion Wong, Bruce Lee, and the collective cast from *Better Luck Tomorrow* leaping from their posters to battle a regiment of Fu Manchus and Dragon Ladies from yesterday and today. And as long as we're writing the script, guess who is the victor in our imaginary? ♣

RENEE TAJIMA-PENÑA, WRITER, was nominated for an Academy Award® for *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1987). Her film, *My America...Or Honk If You Love Buddha* (1997), was an award-winner at the Sundance Film Festival and her most recent film, *Calavera Highway*, was broadcast on PBS in 2008. Her work has premiered at world film festivals including Cannes, New Directors/New Films, Sundance, and Toronto. She has been a film critic and commentator for *The Village Voice*. Tajima-Peña is developing a documentary on the political impact of Bruce Lee and the Asian martial arts.