Identity: East-Asian Women Representations in 1950s/ 1960s Hollywood Film

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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire, in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Design for Film. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Abstract

The portrayal of Asian Women in the golden age of Hollywood Cinema, the 1950s and 1960s is severely stereotyped. This history of stereotypes dates to post-war perceptions of Asian women as returning soldiers brought back wartime stories from the East. These stories manifested into Media and Film. Films reflect their time and portrayals of Asian women are reflective of the American attitudes towards Asians. This thesis explores Hollywood films and how they shaped the public's perceptions and influenced cultural views, often depicting Asia as a land of romance with "exotic beings" (Said, 1978). The 'China Doll' stereotype depicts Asian women as submissive, docile and gentle while the 'dragon lady' is sexually alluring, manipulative and strong. These stereotypes were created by Western male fantasies as "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at." (Berger, 2008, p. 47).

South Pacific (1958) directed by Joshua Logan is a wartime story based on the events of Pearl Harbour in the 1940s during the Second World War. The highly saturated colours of the film create a distant paradise for the viewer which is 'exotic' and beautiful women. Liat is the female character who embodies the 'China Doll' as she is silent, gentle and submissive as her mother sets her up for marriage with a U.S Marine without her even questioning it. *Flower Drum Song* (1961) along with South Pacific was produced by Rodgers and Hammerstein with were innovative in their approaches to allowing for interracial romances on screen. Mei Li is a Chinese immigrant who arrives in San Francisco for an arranged marriage with a wealthy Chinese American man but she discovers he is in love with showgirl Linda Low. She is diverted to Wang Ta whom she falls in love with. She is a perfect example of the 'China Doll' as she is very obedient, submissive and docile. The way she is portrayed she seems like she cannot make her own decisions and requires a man to lead her. This is explored with the transition between tradition and modernism. *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), directed by Richard Quine is a love story between British Expat Robert Lomax and a Sex worker in Hong Kong. He is an artist and he gets Suzie to pose for him in various sexual poses. He exoticised her in his art. This film is examined through the lens of the stereotype.

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Introduction

Since the early 20th century, Hollywood has shaped the public's perceptions and influenced cultural views, often portraying Asia as a land of romance and "exotic beings"—images that have significantly impacted how Americans perceive people of Asian descent (Said, 1978). These depictions have a narrow intercultural understanding of Asian cultures, which has contributed to the creation of stereotypes. This thesis aims to explore the negative portrayals of Asians in American cinema during the golden age, particularly in the late 1950s and 1960s, focusing on stereotypes commonly associated with Asian women, such as the submissive, silent "China Doll" and the seductive, mysterious "Dragon Lady." These archetypes have been shaped by the American perceptions of Asian women influenced by war, media, and film. In the following chapter, these portrayals will be examined through the lens of character and costume design in three films: *South Pacific* (1958), *Flower Drum Song* (1961), and *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960). By analysing these stereotypes, this study will discuss how Asian women have been perceived and depicted in a negative light due to Western male views and the formation of "othering."

Chapter 1: The Origin explores the factors that have contributed to the growth of stereotypes such as the yellow peril, the spread of orientalism, and the yellowface practice in film. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first legislation against free racial immigration to America that aimed to prevent the mixing between white Americans and people of colour. The Chinese were viewed as "perpetual foreigners" and were confined to specific spaces in urban areas. Chinatown in San Francisco is exactly twelve blocks long and two blocks wide. This led to the formation of "othering" people of colour. In addition, film and media of the 1950s and 1960s were impacted by the Cold War conflicts. The portrayals of Asia are reflective of the American attitude towards East Asian women (Pike, 2008). In particular, the two stereotypes are post-war views of American soldiers returning with stories of the exotic East, where they were perceived as submissive dolls or Sex workers. This spread through media like propaganda during the Vietnam War with unrealistic depictions of women being rescued by white men (Bordalo et al., 2016).

Yellowface is another factor that has contributed to stereotyping Asians and racism. Asian characters were played by white American actors; for example, Katherine Hepburn, a Caucasian actress, played the role of Jade, who is a Chinese character in The Dragon Seed (1944). This practice is when makeup is used to alter the appearance of the actor, often by exaggerating the shapes of their eyes to make them appear "slanted" and cheekbones and dark face makeup, which is how Hollywood created an "Asian look." These are stereotypical features associated with Asian people. The Orient is a Western creation and characterises Asia and its people as exotic and often is sexualised in Western representations as a

land of exoticism. This is evident in *South Pacific* (1958), as the warm, highly saturated tones of the rainforest and deep blue sea create a utopic escape for the audience. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the Hong Kong setting of *The World of Suzie Wong (1960)* and how it is depicted as a place of foreign mystery where one can go to fulfil Western fantasies of Asian women. It is a forbidden, distant place.

Chapter 2: The China Doll analyses the China Doll stereotype, also known as the "Lotus Blossom," and how it infantilises and hypersexualises Asian women in Hollywood films. This chapter discusses characters like Liat in *South Pacific* (1958) and Mei Le in *Flower Drum Song* (1961), both of whom challenge this archetype and its effects on cultural representation. *South Pacifi*c and *Flower Drum Song* are both Rodgers and Hammerstein's productions, known for pushing boundaries in their portrayals of Asia and Asian people. On one hand, Rodgers and Hammerstein can be seen as innovative, especially when other studios were hesitant to create "stories of the East". They introduced discussions of interracial relationships, a huge step forward in a period of the strict constraints of Hollywood's Hays Code. Their willingness to address these cultural concerns was not only groundbreaking but also opened the door for further conversations around race and intercultural understandings. However, in these films, Chinatown in San Francisco and island life were romanticised and exoticised with lush vibrant rainforests and blue oceans and vibrant colourful life in these places. Furthermore, this chapter analyses these China Doll characters within this context examining whether they are depicted negatively or positively through their character traits and clothing used by Rodgers and Hammerstein to portray people from "the Orient".

Chapter 3: The Dragon Lady examines the Dragon Lady stereotype with a focus on old Hollywood films such as The World of Suzie Wong (1960) and Flower Drum Song(1961). Characters in these films such as Suzie Wong and Linda Low display attributes commonly associated with this trope such as seductiveness, confidence and mystery, qualities that have a stark contrast to the more passive, submissive China Doll. This contrast is highlighted through the brightly coloured tight-fitting dresses which emphasise their exoticism. For instance, Linda is wearing a bright orange outfit during her performance of the "Fan Tan Fannie" song at Sammy Fong's nightclub, while Suzie is first introduced in a deep red dress with a high leg slit. These costumes are used to reinforce the sexualised image of Asian women, highlighting their roles as objects of desire. The Cheongsam is a traditional Chinese garment that plays an important role in this visual representation. Hollywood often used it to hypersexualise Chinese women, reinforcing the Dragon Lady stereotype. This Portrayal reflects post-war American perceptions towards East Asian women, influenced by Wartime stories told by returning soldiers from the Second World War describing the women as "exotic" and "sexy" and later these images are manifested in film and media therefore making them public perceptions of Asian women.

Chapter 1: The Origin

History and Context

This introductory chapter explores the historical and cultural origins of the "othering" people of Asian descent, with a focus on the frameworks that contributed to their marginalisation. This exploration examines The Chinese Exclusion Act, a law that was passed by the U.S. Congress in the late 19th century that prohibited free racial immigration to America. This chapter also investigates how the "yellow peril" phenomenon emerged during the 1890s, depicting the Chinese people as a threat to Western civilisation. This fear was heavily reinforced through film and media, where Chinese characters such as the villain Fu Manchu were portrayed as greedy and attempting to dominate the world. The technique of yellowface, in which white actors played Asian characters and altered their appearance and exaggerated their facial features with makeup will be examined. Finally, the concept of Orientalism as discussed by Edward Said is investigated to understand how Asia and Asians were often presented as "exotic beings" or as a "place of romance". This view supported the idea that the West is better than the East by marginalising Asian people and romanticising and exoticising their cultures.

Chinatown in San Francisco is the oldest Chinatown in the world and is the backdrop to *Flower Drum Song* (1961), a film that will be analysed in Chapter 2. The mid-19th century in the United States saw major socio-economic changes that resulted in a large number of immigrants from Asia, especially from China, moving to America for a better life. This major event led to the formation of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (American Theatre Guild, 2022). The law has roots in the various treaties made between the Qing Dynasty and the United States government. However, the social conditions in China and "The American Dream" increased Chinese immigration. Moreover, this resulted in the first legislation against free racial immigration in America (Li, 2007). The Exclusion Law stated that "no Chinese can ever become citizens of the United States" as they were called perpetual foreigners. Chinese people were contained within certain perimeters of twelve blocks long and two blocks wide in the northeast of the city. According to Lind-Chi Wang, a Chinatown native, it was created by racism because the white people believed that Chinese could never be mixed with Americans. (Kwong and Wang, 2019). This created a clear divide between white Americans and Asians, a geological "othering.". Edward Said explores this term in his book *Orientalism* (1978) and how during European colonisation and expansion, travellers during the 1800s viewed the East as a place of mystery, adventure, and exoticism, placing the 'oriental' as other, hence the term 'othering' which I refer to in this thesis when describing the female Asian characters in the films mentioned. Said, 1978, p. 57-167). Asian women are often perceived as the "exotic other" in films such as Liat in *South Pacific* (1958) and

Mei Le in *Flower Drum Song* (1961). Both characters are dressed in traditional Chinese clothing and have traditional values like arranged marriage.

The Cold War – Identity and Othering in Film

Hollywood film during the 1950s was shaped by the dynamics of the Cold War conflicts that were manipulated by American media. Films reflect their time, and the portrayals of Asian women on screen are reflective of the attitudes of American culture and society toward women of East Asian descent (Pike, 2008). In particular, the Korean War (1950-1953) and the American-Vietnamese War (1955-1975) influenced Western perceptions of Asia and Asian women, creating stereotypes such as the "China Doll," a submissive, silent, and obedient woman, and a fiery, assertive, and seductive "Dragon Lady.". Stereotypes are a form of generalised and oversimplified images of a particular type of person or thing. They can be used to describe racial groups and genders. U.S. propaganda during the Vietnam War, illustrated unrealistic and offensive images of women, often portraying them as "diminutive butterflies" that needed saving from or by the American man or as a seductive mystery. (Bordalo et al., 2016). This perception refers back to Said's examples of ways of seeing, the exotic Oriental female. Both archetypes were also popularised by Hollywood cinema, which put Asian women into a certain box. The term "doll" implies features of beauty, youthfulness, and fragility, and using this word reduced women to these characteristics. Therefore, the concept of fragility emphasises the idea that the Asian female needs rescue by the Western man" (McGowan, 2020).

Fig.1 : A poster from the the film *A Yank in Viet-Nam* (1964), Allied Artists, Public Broadcasting Service.

Yellowface

American cinema has a history of using yellowface, which is the practice of white actors changing their appearance with makeup in order to play East Asian characters in films (Ng, 2019). In the early years of American cinema, Asians were often portrayed by white actors and actresses. White actors played coloured characters in exaggerated and often demeaning and caricatured ways, which was entertainment called Minstrelsy, where white actors had blackface, yellowface, or redface (Yellowface: Asian Whitewashing and Racism in Hollywood, 2019). Moreover, this continued into Hollywood and became more common on-screen during the 1950s. Before this, there was "an internal Hollywood code" known as the Hays Code, where people of colour and whites were not allowed to have any cross-racial romance or any romantic suggestion, even if white actors were playing the roles of Asians. However, Hollywood justified and rationalised these practices by claiming they "cater to American audiences.". On the other hand, there was cultural imperialism, which was influenced by the anti-miscegenation laws that were put in place by Hollywood. (Yellowface: Asian Whitewashing and Racism in Hollywood, 2019).

Many white actors, such as Katherine Hepburn as Jade in *The Dragon Seed* (1944) and Susan Hayward as Borte in *The Conqueror* (1956), played leading roles as Asians, while Asian people were in the minor background roles (Johnson, 2004). In the image below (Fig. 3), Katherine Hepburn plays a Chinese woman, using yellowface to change her appearance with makeup. Her eyes are artificially stretched outwards, and her cheekbones are exaggerated. This is an example of Hollywood's attempt at a Chinese woman on screen. In Hollywood, white actors dominated the actor food chain, which formed a cyclical problem where Asian-American actors were not given major roles because there were not A-list actors; therefore, they cast A-list white actors in roles of colour instead. The image below is a prime example of the heavy use of yellowface on Hollywood star Katherine Hepburn instead of casting a Chinese actress to play the role. Katherine Hepburn's performance and "the lack of consistency in the accents used by the actors was firmly denounced" as reviewed by *The New York Times*, despite the film's major use of yellowface. Even though Anna May Wong spoke "perfect English" without an accent, the accents outlined a widespread belief among Americans at the time that Asian people especially Chinese people could not speak without an accent. "The Asian accent", along with yellowface were the factors that made up Asians in Hollywood (Ng, 2019).

Fig. 2: Katharine Hepburn as Jade in *The Dragon Seed* (1944). Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. IMDB

Orientalism

Orientalism stereotypically characterises Asia and Asian people as exotic, backward, caricatured, distorted, uncivilised, and even dangerous. It is often seen in American film and media and can be overlooked in the modern approach to combatting prejudice, especially from the perspective of a white Westerner (American Theatre Guild, 2022). The Orient is often sexualised in Western representations as a land of exoticism. The veiled woman is a common image as an alluring object of desire and the forbidden (Shohat and Stam, 2008, p. 148). The Orient is defined as the countries of East and Southeast Asia. Said states that "The Orient was almost a European invention and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, etc.". (Said, 1978, p. 1).

The warm tones of *South Pacific* (1958) create a tropical escape for the viewer. The film's bright, vibrant, and highly saturated colours form a distant paradise of an idealised island and its native people, which is the backdrop for the film. Another example is the shot of *Bali Ha'i Island, which is depicted as a heavenly place that entices one to go there. When the viewer first sees the island, there are "green and purple colours upon the natural beachfront that bring the fictional island mystery and awe. In the film, Bali Ha'i is referred to as a "special island" where men can go to find beautiful women and treasures. Lieutenant Cable is persuaded to travel there by Bloody Mary, where she sets him up for marriage with her daughter, Liat (Dillon, 2024). Additionally,* the interactions between the American characters (Lieutenant Cable) and Liat's character are a representation of the "other" that the American characters encounter, thus highlighting the cultural differences and tensions present in the film. Orientalism was used as a

"Western style of dominating and structuring the East." (need ref) During the Cold War, the United States had significant global power and control, including Eastern countries, such as the attacks on Pearl Harbour in 1941 during WWII. The film is set on Kauai, a Hawaiian island where U.S. Marines are deployed. The American marines have taken control of the island while seeking local Asian women to pass the time. These native women are portrayed as gentle, willing, and "exotic.".

Fig. 3: Bali Ha 'I' Island. *South Pacific* (1958). 20th Century Studios.

The world of Suzie Wong (1960) is set in Hong Kong, a city in the southern province of China. According to Gina Marchetti, Hollywood's creation of the city of Hong Kong was constructed by the American imagination. The city illustrated on screen is influenced by Western fantasies, presenting it as a romanticised and mysterious "oriental" place where one can go to fulfil one's dreams or desires. In addition to offering a distant location to explore the forbidden, Hong Kong serves as a place for defining postwar identity in contrast to the rise of Asian communism and the decline of European colonialism. She also discusses how the film uses a metaphor for racial harmony and intercultural understanding. Although the film "exoticises" Hong Kong, during the time in which the film was made, Suzie and Robert's relationship symbolises the move towards a more modernist world allowing on-screen romances between white men and actresses of Asian descent. (Marchetti, 1994, p. 110-111). This became more common after the Second World War when American soldiers returned from fighting in Asia with stories from the "Far East." As *Sayonara* (1957) is one of the first films with an interracial romance and did not use yellowface for the Asian character, Miiko Taka was a Japanese actress playing a Japanese role in the film.

Fig. 4: Robert exploring Hong Kong with Suzie where she grew up. The World of Suzie Wong (1960). IMDB.