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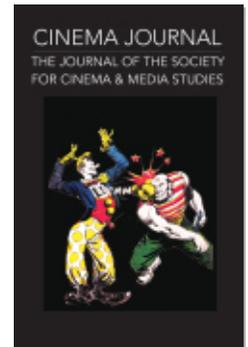
## What Was Asian American Cinema?

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to Asian American media, it is because Asian Americans are understandably drawn to coherent subject positions (e.g., the model minority) even as we recognize that coherence is based on the illusion of historical continuity. \*

*I am grateful to Sarah Wasserman for helping me to think about web culture.*

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## What Was Asian American Cinema?

by SYLVIA SHIN HUEY CHONG

**T**he year 2016 has had a bumper crop of media controversies involving Asian American representation. Just before their Super Bowl appearance, Coldplay and Beyoncé were criticized for appropriating Indian culture in their video “Hymn for the Weekend” (Ben Mor, 2016). Then, despite (or perhaps because of) the #OscarsSoWhite controversy, comedians Chris Rock and Ali G cracked anti-Asian jokes at the Academy Awards, sparking condemnation from prominent Asian American directors and actors such as Ang Lee and Sandra Oh. Of course, there was the endless stream of poor casting choices, from Tilda Swinton as a Tibetan monk in the comic-book film *Doctor Strange* (Scott Derrickson, 2016) to Scarlett Johansson as Major Kusanagi in a live-action remake of a famous Japanese anime, *Ghost in the Shell* (Rupert Sanders, 2017), and, most recently, Matt Damon as an unnamed white savior in the transnational production *The Great Wall* (Zhang Yimou, 2017)—all of these echoing earlier controversies over *Aloha* (Cameron Crowe, 2015), *The Last Airbender* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2010), and *21* (Robert Luketic, 2008). In addition to the vociferous criticism of these announcements on Twitter and blogs, Asian American performers also spoke out against such practices in public forums, including *Fresh off the Boat* (ABC, 2015–present) star Constance Wu, at a panel sponsored by the Chinese American group Committee of 100 in Los Angeles, and veteran actor B. D. Wong at an event titled “Beyond Orientalism” in New York directed at theater professionals. The terms “yellowface” and “whitewashing” even began showing up outside of academia and the blogosphere, entering the mainstream media.

With such growing consciousness of the need for Asian American representation, might we conclude that the time is ripe for something called “Asian American cinema”? If the problem with racist misrepresentation is racial invisibility, then the solution seems to call

for some kind of forced integration of American popular culture in order to claim visibility. And what might that cinema look like? Perhaps one clue might be found in the recent Internet meme sparked by these controversies: #StarringJohnCho, photoshopping the Korean American actor into a variety of films ranging from *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012), *Jurassic World* (Colin Trevorrow, 2015), and the latest James Bond flick, to the rom-com *Me before You* (Thea Sharrock, 2016), the buddy film *The Nice Guys* (Shane Black, 2016), and so on. (A similar meme places Constance Wu in *The Hunger Games* [Gary Ross, 2012] and *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past* [Mark Waters, 2009].) In essence, the campaign is a new-media sit-in of the mostly white world of Hollywood films and television shows, replacing white bodies with Asian ones so as to highlight their erasure from popular representation, but also to assert their utter normalcy in these contexts. We are asked to accept the possibility of Asian American heroes and love interests—the latter in particular confronting the ghosts of antimiscegenation that kept Asian and Asian American actors out of older films such as *The Good Earth* (Sidney Franklin, 1937) and *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (Charles Brabin, 1932).

These calls for Asian American representation and inclusion in the media are certainly important, and they highlight not only the symbolic importance of the cultural industry but also its economic dimensions; the paucity of jobs for Asian American actors, directors, writers, and producers points to a form of employment discrimination that would be actionable in other fields that cannot claim the invisible hand of “the box office” as an excuse. Yet the call for economic parity is overdetermined by the symbolic economy in which these roles, especially on-screen ones, participate. It is not enough to simply have more Asian American deliverymen, dry cleaners, prostitutes, martial artists, or dictators in films and television. But on the flip side, the clamor for “better” roles potentially buys into fantasies of power that Hollywood peddles not only to audiences of color but to all consumers. What, for example, does an Asian American James Bond or Captain America accomplish, other than recruit Asian Americans into a toxic heterosexual masculinity in order to make up for their historical emasculation? This discourse of visibility is partial at best, for it imagines the goal of racial justice as merely inclusion in a system that is already deeply racist and troubled. Yet the desire to see oneself as desirable, through an on-screen proxy, can be powerful, despite all of the pitfalls of such an embrace. The mixed-race video artist Kip Fulbeck once characterized the desperation of Asian American audiences for figures such as Bruce Lee: “America loved him. And the Chinese loved him. Or maybe they loved America loving him.”<sup>1</sup> In a racist world, perhaps the only imaginable self-love is the one measured through the mirror of the dominant group.

One could argue that a shadow economy of self-love and self-representation already exists in the form of an independent Asian and Asian American cinema produced outside of Hollywood and circulated in Asian American film festivals, cultural events, and university programming. The largest and most established of these festivals, such as CAAMFest, the Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival, and Asian CineVision, were founded in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in part to counter the prevailing

1 From *Game of Death* (Kip Fulbeck, 3/4 video; Video Data Bank, 1991), a seven-minute experimental film based on found footage from the original *Game of Death* (Robert Clouse and Bruce Lee, 1978).

negative images of Asian Americans in the culture industry of their time.<sup>2</sup> In turn, these larger festivals feed a network of smaller, regional Asian American film festivals, as well as provide distribution and marketing to films that eventually find their way into university curricula and student-led programming. While most of these films never receive a national theatrical release—at best, some are picked up by PBS or made available through cable and online streaming—they occupy an important niche; not only the actors and narratives on-screen, but also the directors and writers, reflect the diversity, heterogeneity, and transnationality of Asian America that goes unseen in more mainstream productions. Just to take my local Asian Pacific American film festival, DC APA Film, as an example: its 2016 festival included feature-length fictional films such as *Road to Perdition* (Yaser Talebi), an Iranian dark comedy; *Someone Else* (Nelson Kim), a Korean American psychological thriller; and *Welcome to Happy Days* (Gavin Lin), a Taiwanese rom-com. These features were supplemented with documentaries and shorts on such varied topics as the Mississippi Chinese, Filipino farmworkers in 1960s California, Japanese war brides from the post–World War II era, Vietnamese American nail salons, and professional basketball in mainland China. As even this quick survey reveals, these films depart from the paradigm of #StarringJohnCho and #StarringConstanceWu, in which highly assimilated Asian Americans are placed into “American” social groups and settings with negligible friction over their racial identities, national origins, or class standing. The documentary offerings of Asian American film festivals are particularly diligent at highlighting Asian American history and politics, especially in ways that disrupt the dominant narrative of happy, model-minority immigrants pursuing an unproblematic American dream.

The film festivals’ wide embrace of all things Asian American is partly an artifact of the coalitional and pan-ethnic nature of the designation “Asian American” itself. Arising in the late 1960s, the term “Asian American” referenced a history of shared racialization.<sup>3</sup> Many of the people who first identified themselves as Asian American were the American-born descendants of these original migrants from the early 1900s, but after the 1970s, the category has dramatically morphed to include new Asian immigrant communities quite distinct from those that had already settled in the United States. These new migrants may identify more as Asian than Asian American, and the line separating the two groups has also blurred, as satellite television, DVDs, and the Internet have fostered closer ties with Asian culture and media than previous generations would have found possible—hence, the transnational plot of *Welcome*

2 See Stephen Gong, “A History in Progress: Asian American Media Arts Centers, 1970–1990,” in *Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts*, ed. Russell C. Leong (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 1992), 1–9.

3 For a more detailed history of this term, see Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993). While the invocation of the Asian continent may suggest a broad geographical scope encompassing everyone from Turkey to Russia, the specific history of immigration, American imperialism, and militarism created a grouping in the United States of predominantly Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Asian Indian, Vietnamese, and Korean migrants and their descendants. Other groups such as Armenians, Lebanese, Afghans, and Russians were generally excluded from the category of “Asian American” in the United States because, at various points, they were legally separated from other Asians and included under the category of “white” for the purposes of immigration and citizenship (since those other, nonwhite Asians were ineligible for naturalization and barred from entering the country during the early twentieth century).

to *Happy Days*, which features an Asian American tourist falling in love with a local Taiwanese girl. Newly coined acronyms such as “APA” (Asian Pacific American) have acknowledged the influence of Native Hawaiians and Polynesians on Asian American history and politics. With the rise of Islamophobia affecting not only Arab Americans but also South Asian Americans, many have begun to reclaim the “Asianness” of the Middle East and forge new political coalitions (witness the inclusion of the Iranian *Road to Perdition* in the DC APA lineup). Growing numbers of transnational adoptees from Korea, China, and Vietnam complicate the notion of racialization by kinship versus descent. And mixed-race and mixed-ethnic Asian Americans also trouble traditional definitions of racial identity as singular, instead occupying different racial and ethnic subject positions at different times. Thus, even the simplest way of defining Asian American cinema—any film with an Asian American director, writer, or actor—already engages in a complicated classificatory dance.<sup>4</sup>

While the broadness of the category of “Asian American” is to be celebrated, it also means that films and filmmakers get included that have little investment in the “socially committed cinema,” described by Renee Tajima-Peña in 1992, which characterized the independent films championed by the first Asian American film festivals and media arts centers.<sup>5</sup> One of the paradoxes of our supposedly postracial era is that “Asian American” is simultaneously a desired and disavowed category. On the one hand, it adds a drop of exotic color to the multicultural landscape, allowing one to claim “diversity” in relatively safe ways. Many film festivals seek out corporate sponsorship, promoting investment in Asian American cinema as a way to reach a desirable demographic group while at the same time helping these businesses signal their progressiveness—a kind of “yellow washing” just as distasteful as the “whitewashing” of Asian American roles. On the other hand, these uses of “Asian American” have to be devoid of actual racial difference, since that would harken back to histories (and the continuing relevance) of discrimination and exclusion that refute the postracial dream. Promoting the contemporary success of Asian American performers and filmmakers as part of a universalist artistic triumph—look, they’re just like everybody else!—helps avoid the issue of economic and symbolic exclusion and allows Asian Americans to be used as a battering ram against other groups of color’s claims of discrimination. I have seen “Asian American” filmmakers take advantage of Asian American film festivals to help promote films that have nary an Asian American character or topic, as if transcending their racial identity to make “universal” films. In this way, despite their oppositional roots, Asian American film festivals can be made to serve the same ideology of inclusion for inclusion’s sake that mars the visibility politics of mainstream film protests like #StarringJohnCho.

4 Peter Feng raised many of these definitional issues regarding Asian American cinema in a pair of articles he wrote for *Cineaste* magazine in the 1990s, although my discussion here has extended his line of questioning to more recent trends. See Peter Feng, “In Search of Asian American Cinema?,” *Cineaste* 21, nos. 1 and 2 (1995): 32–35; “The State of Asian American Cinema: In Search of Community,” *Cineaste* 24, no. 4 (1999): 20–24.

5 Renee Tajima, “Moving the Image: Asian American Independent Filmmaking 1970–1990,” in *Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts*, ed. Russell C. Leong (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 1992), 10–33, 12.

The transnational dimensions of Asian American cinema can be equally problematic. It is one thing to acknowledge the blurred boundaries between Asia and Asian America today as American audiences and filmmakers alike are immersed in Asian film and media cultures such as Korean dramas, Bollywood musicals, Japanese anime, and Hong Kong action flicks. They do not necessarily rely on Asian American cinema as their sole source of images of Asian bodies on the screen. But it is altogether another thing when “Asia” is elided with “Asian America” for the purposes of diversity politics. As Asian American film festivals have incorporated more Asian films in their programming, their efforts are aided by quasi-diplomatic organizations like the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office (TECRO) or the Korean Embassy’s Cultural Center (KORUS House), which view such programming as a form of soft power diplomacy. International programming such as TECRO’s sponsorship of *Welcome to Happy Days* tends to sidestep issues of racism and celebrate foreign film cultures in ways that promote exoticism and further the “forever foreigner” stereotype of Asian Americans. The protests over Hollywood films such as *Doctor Strange* and *The Great Wall* reveal further complexity over these issues as the producers of such films dismiss the complaints of Asian American fans by claiming that the “real” Asians—in these cases, mainland Chinese film distributors or directors—have no problem with the casting of white actors, even preferring them for their box-office appeal. And even without whitewashing or yellowface, films like *The Great Wall* simply substitute one problematic cultural nationalism (Chinese) for another (American), using Asian American discontent to paper over intra-Chinese dissent.

To be clear, I am not saying that Asian American film festivals are engaging in these tactics of obfuscation and depoliticization. Rather, the racial category of “Asian American,” and thus the associated category of “Asian American cinema,” participates in a larger symbolic economy that serves the interests of groups that are far from engaged in antiracist politics. And thus, we turn full circle to the problems of visibility and representation. The film festivals attempt to skirt this bifurcation of aesthetics and politics by presuming that the mere screening of Asian American films will heal this rift. After all, the idea of the film festival itself suggests an elevation of cultural capital that will raise the value of its associated auteurs and subjects, thus marrying cinephilia with identity politics. But the audience for the contemporary Asian American film festival is as much corporate and governmental sponsors, hungry for the discretionary income and attention of these model minorities, as it is Asian Americans in need of consciousness-raising and self-affirmation. Does the heterogeneity of Asian American cinema today serve a purpose beyond the reification of a neoliberal consumer category? Does the category of Asian American cinema help “serve the people”—to invoke the Maoist slogan of a bygone era—or does it serve the system at large that perpetuates Asian American racialization and marginalization, or even worse, mobilize Asian American identity to suppress the political claims of other racialized groups?

The title of this essay may betray my biases on this issue, as I am not merely trying to double down on a better definition of Asian American cinema moving forward but am arguing for the obsolescence of this category, along the same lines as those posited by

literary critic Kenneth Warren regarding African American literature.<sup>6</sup> Warren argued that African American literature was tied inextricably to the existence of a Jim Crow society that had waned since the 1950s. This was not to say that African American *people* had disappeared, or that they had stopped producing literature, but to propose, rather, that what black authors wrote after the civil rights era was fundamentally different from what they wrote before, and that the notion of a literature bound to an identity category was antiquated and perhaps even politically dangerous. Similarly, what if the historical moment for Asian American cinema has passed, dissolved not by the disappearance of anti-Asian racism as such but rather by the co-opting of the category by “postracial” concerns under the banner of diversity?

Even if relegated to a historical phenomenon, “Asian American cinema” is still worth screening and studying. But I no longer have faith in the ability of this category to do the social, political, and aesthetic work associated with it in the past, even if it wanted to. Is it even worth fighting over whether Tilda Swinton or an Asian American actor plays the already ridiculously Orientalized Tibetan monk in *Doctor Strange*? Perhaps, as my literary colleague Timothy Yu has suggested, Asian American cinema has “failed”—impotent to intervene in national debates about Asian Americans like the current rehashing of the black-Asian “divide” in media coverage of police officer Peter Liang, who was convicted of manslaughter in the death of Akai Gurley in Brooklyn—yet still trotted out whenever it is needed to add a drop of “color” to a syllabus, a cultural festival, a university events calendar.<sup>7</sup> But that failure—the pastness of Asian American cinema—speaks to a potential future cinema that is yet to be envisioned. Will that future cinema star John Cho or Constance Wu? Maybe. But I want their visibility to count for something rather than to be a goal in and of itself.

6 Warren posed a provocative question—“What was African American literature?”—in a series of lectures at Harvard, and in a condensed form online, which sparked a tremendous amount of debate and consternation. See Kenneth Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); and Warren, “Does African-American Literature Exist?,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 24, 2011, <http://chronicle.com/article/Does-African-American/126483/>. Obviously, many have contested Warren’s formulations, questioning, among other things, his overreliance on legislative-judicial fiats in defining a people, his hostility to identity politics, and his privileging of a bourgeois literary culture. See Marlon B. Ross, “Kenneth W. Warren’s *What Was African American Literature?*: A Review Essay,” *Callaloo* 35, no. 3 (2012): 604–612; Erica Edwards and Walter Benn Michaels, “*What Was African American Literature?* A Symposium,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 13, 2011, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/what-was-african-american-literature-a-symposium>.

7 Timothy Yu, “Has Asian American Studies Failed?,” *tympa*n (blog), December 20, 2011, <http://tympa.n.blogspot.com/2011/12/has-asian-american-studies-failed.html>.