

# Significant Trends in Portrayal of Asian American in Hollywood Films and the Role of American Perspective

Sharmaine Ibarra

Dongseo University, Busan, SOUTH KOREA

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## ABSTRACT

**Keywords:**

Asian American,  
Asian Hate,  
Hollywood,  
Portrayal.

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**Corresponding Author:**

Sharmaine Ibarra  
Dongseo University, Busan,  
SOUTH KOREA  
Email: sharmainebarra@yahoo.com

This research reexamines the relationship of reality and film through examining the significant changes in portrayal of Asian Americans in Hollywood films. The American perspective has played a critical role in portraying Asian characters in film for the longest time. However, the recent shift from portrayal of Asian-to-Asian American characters revealed that Hollywood films are slowly breaking away from dependency on American perspective. Instead, the reality that is started to be portrayed in Hollywood films is from the perspective of Asian Americans which is the long-time goal of Asian American community. The study examines the significant change in portrayal of Asian Americans in Hollywood films by classifying four periods; before 1990s, 1990s, 2000s and 2010s. Two films that represent the significant trend in each period are also analyzed. The study concluded that the increase in Asian American filmmakers and the efforts of Asian American community in utilizing technology aided the positive change. Despite of COVID-19 pandemic, positive change in portrayal of Asian Americans in Hollywood films is expected to continue through constant efforts.

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## INTRODUCTION

Asian hate is a long-standing issue in the United States. The recent anti-Asian hate related incidents indicate the increasing gravity of the issue. Anti-Asian hate incidents created fear that has prompted Asian Americans to acquire self-defense weapons such as firearms and pepper spray (Chao, 2022). The Atlanta spa shootings incident aggravated the alarming Asian hate in the United States. On March 16, 2021, six Asian American were killed in Atlanta including two women of Chinese descent and four of Korean descent. The incident was further criticized when the Cherokee County sheriff's office attempted to downplay the racial motivation of the case. They claimed that the gunman Robert Aaron Long was motivated by his desire to eradicate sexual temptation and a bad day. The claim overlooked the report of national Korean newspaper The Chosun Ilbo where Long allegedly yelled "I'm going to kill all Asians" while committing the crime. The anti-Asian argument became stronger after Captain Jay Baker, one of the police officers that downplayed the racial motivation, was found. Baker previously posted a Facebook photo of a T-shirt with "Covid-19 IMPORTED VIRUS FROM CHY-NA" printed on it. Long was found guilty of murder, but not of hate crime despite of reports to the contrary (Shyong, 2021).

The Atlanta spa shootings appeared to be the height of violence following a year of COVID-19 spread in the United States which is simultaneous with the surge of anti-Asian hate crimes. According to data compiled by

the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism, Anti-Asian hate crimes climbed by 339 percent last year compared to the year before, with New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and other cities setting new records in 2020 (Yam, 2022). The California Department of Justice (DOJ) data shows that from 43 percent in 2019 to 89 percent in 2020, the number of reported anti-Asian hate crimes climbed by 107 percent (Gover, Harper & Langton, 2020).

COVID-19 which allegedly originated in Wuhan, China fuels the hate against Asian American. The Trump administration, together with former United States president Donald Trump, several times called COVID-19 a "Wuhan virus", "Chinese virus" and "Kung fever" (*Trump dubs COVID-19*, 2020). According to a study, anti-Asian sentiment due to COVID-19 on Twitter rised after Trump referred COVID-19 as "Chinese virus" in a March 2020 tweet (Hswen et all., 2021). Furthermore, several videos attacking Asian Americans verbally with "Go back to China" surfaced in social media (Colbert, 2021). The victims of verbal attacks are not limited to Chinese-Americans. Asian Americans with ancestors from East Asia and Southeast Asian countries like Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, and Philippines also experienced "Go back to China" verbal assault because of similarity in physical features. Contrary to the surge of anti-Asian hate crimes, portrayal of Asian Americans in Hollywood films interestingly displays significant trends recently. The trend started during the 2000s when Asian Americans started to get roles that were previously played by white actors. The notable instance is when Lucy Liu bagged the role of Alex Munday for the film adaptation of hit TV franchise Charlie's Angels (2000). Asian Americans also began to be portrayed as multidimensional characters that debunk the previous stereotypical portrayal including kung-fu master, perpetual foreigner, low level of English proficiency, funny sidekick, and model minority. Harold Lee of Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle (2004) and Han Lue of The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift (2006) are good examples of multidimensional Asian American characters.

During the onset of the 2010s, the significant trends in portrayal of Asian Americans slowed in mainstream films but continued in television and online video sharing platforms like Youtube. However, the momentum in Hollywood films regained in 2018 where Asian Americans portrayed romantic comedy leading ladies. The historical all-westernized Asian cast Crazy Rich Asians (2018) introduced the Asian American leading lady, Rachel Chu. It became the most successful Hollywood studio romantic comedy in 9 years in the United States box office (McClintock, 2019).

Despite of COVID-19 pandemic, portrayal of Asian Americans continued to develop. The recent breakthrough is the first Asian American led-film of Marvel Cinematic Universe, Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings (2021). Shang-chi is an important development in portrayal of Asian American because it contradicts the white hero and Asian villain stereotype. He is also portrayed as cool, strong and manly which is opposite to the emasculated, effeminate or hypermasculated portrayal of Asian American men in Hollywood films for decades. Moreover, it is the penetration of an Asian American superhero in multi-billion film franchises that is part of pop culture.

Hollywood and society have been interconnected for the longest time. Hollywood films reflect certain widely held ideas and "beliefs about what it means to be an American" and depict current trends, issues, and events, functioning as historical records of the times in which they were made (*Movies and culture*, 2016). For this matter, negative perceptions of Americans towards Asians, in general, greatly influence the negative trend in portrayal of Asian Americans since classical Hollywood cinema. The negative trend in portrayal of Asian Americans was attributed in the 1850s during the mass migration of Chinese to the United States. These Chinese took a chance to escape poverty in China through working in the California Gold rush. Despite the unreasonable argument, Americans started blaming the influx of Chinese workers for their economic difficulties such as low wages (History, 2021).

The perception of Americans to Asian Americans as a threat perpetuated during World War II. The United States government worked with Hollywood to support the war by using films as a potent instrument

(Mamood, Pham, Lee & Grzan, n.d.). The propaganda films produced in this era often portrayed the Japanese as evil villains that created hate against Asian people. It resulted to continuous negative trends during the Vietnam war where the United States participated and drafted poor or working class young American men to be deployed in the Battle of Hue (Encyclopedia, 2022). Even after the war, the situation created empathy to the American soldiers who were sent to war while hate towards Asian men who were perceived as someone who cannot protect themselves. The reflection of the given circumstances appeared in mainstream films that portrayed Asian American as ridiculed powerless caricatures. Asian American men are often effeminate while women are hypersexualized. Mr. Yunioshi from Breakfast at Tiffany's (1961) and Long Duk Dong of Sixteen Candles (1984) are examples of caricatured Asian characters.

Asian Americans were seen again as an economic threat during the 1980s. The car industry encountered increasing difficulties that resulted in unemployment while Japanese automakers were expanding their presence in the United States (Kai-Hwa Wang, 2017). In addition to the rise of Asian Americans as a model minority. The economic frustration of Americans is attributed to the Anti-Asian hate crimes during that time that are similar seen nowadays.

According to Wenbo Li, co-author of the study that aimed to explain the stigmatization of Asian people during COVID-19, revealed that stereotypes and views about Asian Americans were more potent than other factors we explored in predicting stigmatization (The Ohio State University, 2020). This explains that the anti-Asian sentiment recently was not because of COVID-19 pandemic alone. Unlike today, Asian American victims decades ago were silently enduring the anti-Asian hate assaults until the murder trial of Vincent Chin in 1983. The incident that happened in 1982 did not catch so much attention. However, the unjust verdict fueled the Asian American movement for better representation in American society. The movement influenced a slow but positive trend in portrayal of Asian American in Hollywood films during the 1990s.

## METHOD

The study divides the depiction of Asian Americans in Hollywood films into four periods: before the 1990s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010. In each period, I gathered huge box office Hollywood films with Asian and Asian American characters and identified the characteristics of the significant changes in their portrayal. The reason and influence of significant changes will be explained through connecting with real life context including current events, technology advancement, trends in local Asian American communities and other mainstream media.

The films that are subjected to the analysis are representative of significant trends in portrayal of Asian and Asian American in the specific period. The popularity, huge box office success and how strongly it exhibits the characteristic of significant trend in portrayal of Asian American characters will be taken into consideration when choosing a film. The popularity of the film will be assessed through mainstream media such as online news articles, research and social media.

One film will be dedicated to specifically analyze the portrayal of female Asian American while the other is on male Asian American. To effectively analyze, I will choose one Asian on Asian American character in each film and describe how it is portrayed. Consequently, two scenes where the Asian character appeared will be analyzed through mise-en-scène and story narrative.

On the other hand, Americans have difficulty to recognize which ethnicity an Asian American with East Asian and Southeast Asian descent belongs to, which is commonly called as Wrong Asian. [16] Because of similarity in physical features, Americans often generalize them. The example for this matter is the recent “Go back to

China” verbal attack against Asian Americans that I mentioned earlier.

Due to this condition, I decided to limit my study on Asian Americans with East Asia and Southeast Asian descent which includes China, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar (Burma), Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos, Singapore, Timor-Leste (East Timor) and Brunei Darussalam. This is despite the fact that the Census Bureau defines Asian American as to Americans with a descent from Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent (Kambhampaty, 2020). The characters with South Asian descent including Indian subcontinent and Pakistan, will not be included in the study. India has interesting developments in portrayal of Asian American in Hollywood that can correlate to Bollywood which needs a huge amount of time to study.

In addition, the study will focus on Hollywood films with high box-office. Films with high box-office will help to justify the popularity of the film. It could also reflect the collective perception of Americans toward the particular portrayal of Asian American character due to their choice of the film. The response of American viewers is correlated with their perception towards Asian American.

TV shows, animated films and other mainstream media that featured Asian and Asian American characters will be only mentioned in the study but not be elaborated for further analysis. Instead, they aided for justification for the films that will manifest a significant change.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Society's perception is generally reflected in films like how the long history of Asian hate created a negative trend in portrayal of Asian American. However, the recent contradiction between the increase of anti-Asian hate crimes and increase in positive trend in portrayal of Asian Americans distorted the pattern. The change in pattern is an interesting example of how the relationship between film and reality works in a complex way.

### **Asia through the Eyes of Americans before 1990s**

I have identified the four significant changes in portraying Asians from the 1890s when first images of Asians were recorded. The result revealed that both male and female Asian were first portrayed as people with a colorful and distinct culture from the west. The first significant change was identified during the 1910s where male Asian portrayal changed into an evil villain with the goal of conquering the world. The portrayal later changed into a mysterious detective with broken English in the 1920s. However, in the 1970s, a vital shift in representation occurred. Male Asian were either portrayed as a martial artist or geek with one-dimensional character. Because of this, male Asian characters that appeared in mainstream films are often caricatures and used as punchlines.

On the other hand, I identified two significant changes in female Asian portrayal from the 1890s. The first significant change is into the dragon lady character, who is a strong, tyrannical, and mysterious woman in the 1930s. The portrayal evolved to a lotus blossom or China doll character that is innocent and an object of desire for men. It is often portrayed as a prostitute.

I analyzed two films that became notable for their harmful of Asian stereotypes that still exist today, which are Sixteen Candles (1984) and Full Metal Jacket (1987). Asian characters were found to be presented as one-dimensional characters and defined through the perception of their surroundings. Such depiction was accentuated through scene analysis where Asian characters were defined by American characters through humor and punchline.

To further explain the significant change in the Asian portrayal, I took the account of current affairs and found out that it influenced the portrayal. Factors including mass migration, war, different physical features and culture war greatly affect the changes in Asian portrayal. The portrayal before the 1990s, generally influenced the portrayal in the next decades.

### **Effect of Hong Kong Cinema in Hollywood during 1990s**

The study revealed that portrayal of Asians as martial artists before the 1990s contributed to Asian representation during the 1990s. There are two significant changes that I identified during the 1990s. First is telling stories of Asian immigrants which is the start in identifying the clear line between Asian and Asian American character. Second is the martial arts role for Asian characters.

The two significant changes are positive development in Asian portrayal in Hollywood. The biggest factor of the significant change is the boom of the Hong Kong film industry. Film directors and actors from Hong Kong started to create a name in Hollywood. The storyline of films was also an archetype from Hong Kong films. Also, the Asian American organizations that were voicing out the injustice in the community.

Due to the popularity of action films during the 1990s, I analyzed the blockbuster action films *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997) and *Rush Hour* (1998) in this period. I identified that the significant change was Asian characters have more depth compared to the Asian characters from the films before the 1990s. Though, the characters are still perceived as Asian or an outsider from the United States. Asian characters with humane portrayal are often depicted as a visitor or tourist in the United States. However, martial artist portrayals of women give more advantage in female Asian portrayal in the next decade compared to male Asian portrayal.

### **Breaking Asian American Stereotypes during 2000s**

Film franchises were also gaining momentum during this period and identifying how Asian American characters are portrayed is important to further understand the change in this period. In this regard, I analyzed *Charlie's Angels* (2000) and *Fast and Furious: Tokyo Drift* (2006) which are part of popular film franchises. It revealed that the significant change during the 2000s was the introduction of Asian American identity. Accents are removed, character is multi-dimensional, and ethnicity does not play a crucial role in character's personality and film narrative. The positive development was brought by the second-generation Asian Americans that build university organizations and use pre-social media internet to voice out Asian discrimination.

### **The Role of Social Media on Significant Trends during 2010s**

Lastly, I analyzed the films *To All the Boys I Loved Before* (2018) and *Shang-Chi and The Legend of The Ten Rings* (2021) for the period of 2010s. Both films showed remarkable change in portrayal of Asian American characters despite alarming anti-Asian hate incidents. It also revealed that social media and online video streaming played a big role in significant change in portrayal of Asian American in Hollywood. Unlike during the pre-social media era, most Americans' knowledge about the east is anime and video games. Through social media and online video streaming, Americans were introduced to Kpop which fascinated a lot of fans. Social media also helped Asian American organizations to rapidly call out injustice in Asian American representation in mainstream media. These influences brought significant change in Asian American portrayal: teenage leading lady and superhero, roles that only get by American before.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, each decade after the 1990s brought significant changes in Asian portrayal in Hollywood. The change in portrayal reflects the transition of Asian characters to Asian American in Hollywood films. The current events, technology and aging Asian American demographics are main components of change in portrayal.

The study also concluded that Asian American community initiatives through the use of technology supported the positive transformation by mapping the major change in portrayal of Asian Americans in Hollywood during four periods and studying eight films that illustrate the change. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, efforts to improve the depiction of Asian Americans in Hollywood films are expected to continue.

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