

daughter, then guide them to a safe place—proving the humanity of the real American Arab community.

The Cultural Other

Fourteen of the twenty movies discussed here do not present Americans of Arab descent as they should—as neighbors, friends, classmates, and coworkers. Instead, the industry has misrepresented and maligned them. Yet openness to change is an American tradition. Not so many years ago filmmakers projected other ethnic Americans—Asians, Blacks, Italians, Jews, and Latinos—as the cultural Other. No longer. Aware that these heinous stereotypes injure innocents, these Americans and others formed pressure groups and acted aggressively against discriminatory portraits. Minorities also became a key part of the industry's creative work force, functioning as executives, producers, writers, and directors.

Not many Arab Americans are involved in

the film industry; not one is a famous Hollywood mogul. And Arab Americans have been slow to mobilize, although the depiction of Arab Americans as born terrorists in the Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle *True Lies* (1994) did stir widespread, vocal criticism that shows the possibilities of organized resistance to ethnic profiling. Mainstream movies such as *A Perfect Murder* and *Enough* show that inclusion of Arab American characters is profitable and possible. These films suggest that Hollywood is beginning to address hurtful stereotypes, and that some producers are projecting Americans of Arab descent as regular folk. As for the future, when Americans of Arab heritage become an integral part of the industry, when they begin forming lobbying groups in Los Angeles, and when producers display them in family films on a par with *I Remember Mama* (1948) and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), perhaps moviegoers will finally begin to view them honestly—as true Americans.

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TERRY HONG

Asian Americans

In 1587 the Spanish galleon *Nuestra Senora de Esperanza* (Our Lady of Hope) landed in California, bringing Filipino crewmembers who acted as scouts for the landing party. Almost two centuries later, in the mid-1700s—well before the signing of the U.S. Declaration of Independence—other Filipino sailors, escaping the brutal conditions of conscripted labor on Spanish ships, arrived on the shores of Louisiana, where they founded coastal fishing villages. They were the first Asians known to have come to North America and stayed.

In the next century, Chinese laborers arrived in California, marking the first large-scale wave of Asian immigration. Although the common belief is that these immigrants came to "Gold Mountain" (in Mandarin Chinese, *gum san*) to escape the hardships in their home country and take advantage of the potential wealth found in a land where the streets were rumored to be paved with gold, the more accurate explanation of the origins of Chinese immigration is mutual economic need between two countries.

With the end of legal slavery throughout the United States, the growing labor needs of a burgeoning nation—especially the West Coast, where there was no legacy of African American enslavement—turned to other "colored" workers for manpower. Chinese laborers, along with smaller populations of South Asian, Japanese, and later Korean laborers, provided muscle to build the transcontinental railroad, develop the agricultural industry (including revolutionary irrigation systems), and work in newly established factories and canneries. They were paid a fraction of what their white counterparts re-

ceived then heavily taxed on what little they earned. Excluded from other forms of employment, they opened businesses such as "Chinese laundries," often providing services that their white neighbors disdained to do.

The influx of these Asian laborers led to racial tension, for many white Americans saw these immigrants as a threat to their jobs and their security. The "yellow peril" had to be contained, lest American—read white—rule be challenged. Such racially motivated prejudice and fears against Asians led to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which banned the immigration of Chinese laborers to the United States. It was the first—although unfortunately not the last—institutionalized racist law to single out Asians in America.

Even birth on American soil did not guarantee U.S. citizenship, even though the Fourteenth Amendment asserted that right. Not until 1898, when California-born Wong Kim Ark challenged the Supreme Court, did American-born Asians irrefutably earn the right to citizenship.

In 1904, Congress amended the 1882 law to exclude immigrants from the Philippines, Guam, Samoa, and even Hawaii. In 1907, the so-called Gentlemen's Agreement put an end to Japanese labor immigration. The Immigration Act of 1917, also known as the Barred Zone Act, established a zone of countries that excluded most of Asia, as well as parts of Russia, the Middle East, and Afghanistan. In 1922, the Cable Act stripped American women of their citizenship if they married "aliens ineligible for naturalization," meaning Asians. In 1922 as well, the

Japanese-born Takao Ozawa was denied naturalization, in accordance with the 1790 Naturalization Act, which allowed only "free White persons" to become U.S. citizens. In 1923, citing that he was biologically Caucasian and therefore white, Bhagat Singh Thind applied for naturalization, but the *U.S. vs. Bhagat Singh Thind* decision officially barred Asian Indians as well from citizenship.

By 1924, the National Origins Act effectively ended all Asian immigration, except from the Philippines, which was by then a U.S. territory. But that, too, came to a virtual end with the 1934 Tydings-McDuffie Act, which promised independence in ten years but limited Filipino immigration to a mere fifty individuals a year.

Less than ten years later, on February 19, 1942, Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, sending 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent into concentration camps for the duration of World War II. Ironically, the 442d Regimental Combat Team, predominantly made up of second-generation Japanese Americans and led by a Korean American, Colonel Young Oak Kim, became the most decorated military unit in U.S. history.

For Asian-born American residents, moreover, the 1790 Naturalization Act remained in effect until 1952, in essence relegating Asian Americans to foreigner status for almost two centuries following the American Revolution, a war fought for and by immigrants to the then-new world.

Not until 1965, with the Immigration and Nationality Act, were anti-Asian immigration laws finally lifted. The result was drastic: from less than 1 percent of the U.S. population in 1970, Asian Americans made up 4 percent of the population in 2000. Today, Asian Americans are the nation's fastest-growing minority population after Hispanics. But even with a history older than the nation, Asian Americans are, for the most part, still perceived as foreign, as "other," and continue to face racism that runs the spectrum from blatant exotification to complete ostracism.

Asian Americans in Film

Just as Asian Americans are a part of American history from the beginning, so, too, are Asian Americans participants in American film history literally since its inception. In 1899, when Thomas Alva Edison began making the very first films with his newly invented Kinetograph, among his simple attempts were at least four films dramatizing the Philippines campaign of 1899, when the United States acquired the Philippine Islands at the end of the Spanish-American War. (The films can be viewed at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/edhtml/edre.html>.) Shot in New Jersey, the reenactments show the American army subduing the cowardly, weak Filipinos. That depiction of the great white man conquering the yellow enemy in effect laid the foundation for the representation of Asians and Asian Americans for over a century of American celluloid history. As the U.S. government sought to control Asian Americans through exclusionary and racist laws, Hollywood, too, attempted to control the Asian American image on film.

Despite anti-Asian sentiment, three Asian American actors managed to establish long-standing careers during the twentieth century: Sessue Hayakawa (1890–1973), a Japanese-born American who became a silent film actor and was later nominated for an Academy Award in 1957 for *The Bridge on the River Kwai*; Philip Ahn (1905–1978), the son of Korean patriot Ahn Chang Ho, who was the first U.S.-born Korean American; and the legendary Anna May Wong (1905–1961), who was Asian America's first internationally recognized actor.

In spite of their unmistakable talents, all three could not escape the trap of Hollywood's stereotypes. Hayakawa's first great success was in Cecil B. De Mille's *The Cheat* (1915), in which he played a villain who victimized a wealthy white woman. Variations of the dark, evil, plotting villain would be Hayakawa's signature role throughout his career. Ahn was originally rejected for his first major role in

Anything Goes (1934) because, as a native-born American, his English was too good for the part. Only when he mimicked an artificial Asian accent did he get the role. Wong's frustration over being cast in limiting roles such as a sacrificial Lotus Blossom in *Toll of the Sea* (1922), a slave girl in *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924), the ultimate dragon lady in *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931), and a prostitute in *Shanghai Express* (1932), in addition to her defeat over not getting the lead in the film version of Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* (1937), led her to leave Hollywood for international travel and performance. She returned in the 1950s to a television series, *The Gallery of Madame Liu-Tsong*, but it lasted only a few weeks.

Overall, anti-Asian sentiment persisted in the United States in various forms throughout most of the twentieth century and was well reflected on the silver screen. As white America had first perceived the immigrant laborers—the fear of yellow peril—Hollywood's Asian characters, too, were cunning, evil, and untrustworthy. These Asian roles were not even played by actors of Asian descent but by white actors in hideous yellowface, complete with plastic prosthetics and overdone makeup. The Swedish-born Walter Oland spent the majority of his career as the evil-incarnate Fu Manchu in such films as *The Mysterious Fu Manchu* (1929) and as the faux-Chinese detective Charlie Chan in such films as *Charlie Chan Carries On* (1931). Similarly, Myrna Loy was often cast as an exotic Asian woman (e.g., *Mask of Fu Manchu*, 1933), whose dark sensuality threatened white America. Of course, in the end, the honesty and purity of the white American hero could not be overcome, and all yellow evil was vanquished.

In addition to anti-immigration laws, anti-miscegenation laws emerged to fuel yellowface on film, and with them, new stereotypes emerged in the 1930s and beyond. With interracial marriage now illegal, Hollywood's Motion Picture Industry Code prohibited any

scenes suggesting miscegenation as desirable. Leading white actresses with faces altered by cosmetic tape, rather than Asian American actresses, were chosen for major Asian roles. By casting such actresses as Luise Rainer in *The Good Earth* (1937), Katharine Hepburn in *Dragon Seed* (1944), and Shirley MacLaine in *My Geisha* (1962), Hollywood redefined the notion of Asian beauty. To be a beautiful Asian meant having more Caucasian features. On the other hand, famous Hollywood men continued to don yellowface as well, although their portrayals of Asian men were hardly complimentary: see, for example, John Wayne as the war-crazed Genghis Khan in *The Conqueror* (1956); Marlon Brando as the sneaky, backstabbing Japanese interpreter in *Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956); Ricardo Montalban as the sexless dancing eunuch in *Sayonara* (1957); and Mickey Rooney as the squint-eyed, buck-toothed Japanese landlord in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961)—whose hideous caricature has recently resurfaced as Icebox.com's objectionable Mr. Wong.

As late as 1995, *The Complete Make-Up Artist*, by Penny Delamar, explained how to do "Caucasian to oriental" and "Caucasian to Indian," complete with illustrations of a young blonde woman transformed to resemble Fu Manchu, still one of Hollywood's favorite fake Asians. Yellowface also received international attention in the 1990s when non-Asian actor Jonathan Pryce was cast as a Eurasian engineer in *Miss Saigon*, a theatrical spectacle whose producers insisted that no Asian American actors talented enough could be found to play the London-originated role on Broadway. Even more recently, the character of Miss Swan on Fox's *Mad TV* has come under attack for non-Asian actor Alex Borstein's recurring portrayal of an English-challenged nail-salon owner in heavy Asian-like makeup. Despite adamant claims that the character is not of Asian origin, that she originally appeared in the first sketch as the unmistakably Asian-sounding Miss Kwan makes denials suspect.

Indeed, yellowface is, most unfortunately, alive and well.

Beyond Yellowface and the Birth of New Stereotypes

In addition to the use of yellowface, Hollywood continued to control the celluloid image of Asian America through new, insidious stereotypes. Beyond the yellow peril of the first Asian American immigrants, world events began to further shape depictions of Asians and Asian Americans in film.

With Japan's expansion into Korea at the turn of the century and into China in the 1930s came new fears of Asian domination. Now under siege, the Chinese were more favorably depicted in Hollywood. Suddenly they were the "good Asian," being threatened by the "bad Asian"—the Japanese. The Chinese suffered most nobly as worthy peasants in *The Good Earth* (1937). Anna May Wong was twice the loyal Chinese ally plotting against the Japanese enemy in *Bombs over Burma* (1942) and *Lady from Chungking* (1943). Anthony Quinn played a Chinese guerilla fighting the Japanese in *China Sky* (1945), while Chinese children helped save American pilots in *China's Little Devils* (1945). With Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, the vilification of the Japanese intensified. The Asian face in American film was associated with the cruel, non-English speaking caricature of the demonized Japanese soldier, as in films like *The Purple Heart* (1944), *Back to Bataan* (1945), and *First Yank in Tokyo* (1945).

When World War II ended, leaving Japan in utter devastation, Hollywood abandoned its version of the evil Japanese and reinstated the Chinese into the "bad Asian" slot just in time for the Red Scare of early 1950s McCarthyism. *Flash Gordon*, which debuted as a film in 1936 with evil Ming the Merciless, emperor of futuristic Mongo—Mongolia? as in China?—returned in 1952 as a full-blown television series. *Shanghai Story* (1954) had evil Red Chinese trapping innocent Americans. Furthermore, in

a complete turnaround from less than ten years earlier, *The House of Bamboo* (1955) found the Japanese working together with the Americans, even falling in love with them in *Three Stripes in the Sun* (1955). In 1955 as well, John Sturges's *Bad Day at Black Rock*, starring Spencer Tracy, addressed anti-Japanese racism and internment of the war years. What a difference a decade made.

With the 1947 amendment to the 1945 War Brides Act, which granted U.S. entry for the Asian wives and children of U.S. military, Hollywood discovered the box-office potential of the love affair between the white male and the Asian female, as witnessed by the success of *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* (1955), in which William Holden made his Asiaphile debut, falling for a Eurasian doctor played by Jennifer Jones. That Eurasian angle was key, as it was deemed permissible for non-Asian actresses in yellowface to be swept away by the conquering white hero—but not permissible for the truly Asian women to be so desired, much less conquered.

Hollywood exploited the demand for the interracial relationship, marked by the larger-than-life debut of the geisha in such films as *Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956) and *Sayonara* (1957)—she was beautiful and subservient, a lotus blossom ready to please. Then came *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), in which William Holden returned to fall in love with Nancy Kwan, herself a Eurasian actress—in this case, Kwan was just Asian enough and yet not Asian enough to pose any sort of threat. Suzie Wong became the ultimate Hollywood-created Asian woman, a prostitute with a heart of gold, ever ready to offer pleasure to the white man who could pay the highest price. She was a sexual dynamo, more mysterious, sultrier, more desirable than her earlier incarnations. She remains, unfortunately, one of the most pernicious stereotypes today.

Fast forward to the mid-1960s, when exclusionary immigration laws were finally lifted to allow for large numbers of Asians to enter the

United States and anti-miscegenation laws were abolished nationwide with *Loving vs. Virginia* in 1967. The decade ended with the civil rights movement, when Orientals became Asian Americans. Finally, despite various backgrounds, cultures, and experiences, Asian Americans began to find a united, organizing voice. With greater numbers came better representation. In a few surprising instances, the Asian man got the Asian girl, as in *Walk Like a Dragon* (1960), when James Shigeta won Nobu McCarthy from Jack Lord, or in *Bridge to the Sun* (1961) when James Shigeta even got the white girl Carroll Baker. Also in 1961, *Flower Drum Song*, based on the 1958 Rodgers and Hammerstein Broadway musical about life in San Francisco's Chinatown, became the first Hollywood film with an almost-all Asian cast. *Song* was not without controversy: detractors hated it for creating a whitewashed version of Chinatown filled with misconceptions and stereotypes, while supporters adored it because it was the first time stage and screen featured Asian-looking faces.

The 1970s saw the meteoric rise of Bruce Lee, who ironically had to abandon the United States (he was born in San Francisco) to create the ultimate Hollywood fighting machine. After enduring growing racism in Hollywood, Lee finally left for Hong Kong in disgust after David Carradine was cast in *Kung Fu*—yellowface never dies—as the wandering monk character that Lee originally created for himself. Lee's legacy—stereotypes and all—remains timeless with Dragon-wannabes.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Hollywood continued to churn out new variations of old stereotypes. One of the worst offenders was *Year of the Dragon* (1985), complete with a Connie Chung-like reporter who must be tamed, then dominated by the white man who is busy fighting the evil Chinese mafia who have overrun New York City. The film's rampant, insulting stereotypical depictions of Asian Americans earned it nationwide objections and protests, and even an admission of

racism two years later by its screenwriter, Oliver Stone, in *American Film* magazine: "I got the rap of racism . . . the complaints were certainly legitimate about *Dragon*." Additionally, even well-intentioned films ostensibly about Asian or the Asian American experience did not have Asian American lead roles. While one might argue that yellowfacing is no longer rampant, the audience must still question why Asian Americans are still subordinated even in their own stories: *The Killing Fields* (1984), about the horrors in Cambodia during the Khmer Revolution in which Haing S. Ngor played a supporting role to Sam Waterston and John Malkovich, or *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997) in which Brad Pitt was surrounded by extras in their own country, or *The Lost Empire* (2001), in which a white businessman was the vehicle to tell the tale of the legendary (and Chinese) Monkey King. Perhaps the worst offender of all was Hollywood's version of the Japanese internment, *Come See the Paradise* (1990), starring Dennis Quaid as the white husband of the imprisoned Tamlyn Tomita.

Good intentions aside, other films continued to find commercial success by furthering new stereotypes. *The Karate Kid* series, which began in 1983, was one of many titles featuring the wise Asian sage with mystical powers rooted in martial arts. *Sixteen Candles* (1984) introduced audiences to the sexless Asian geek. The Asian/Japanese work ethic was lampooned in *Gung Ho* (1986). The Japanese became the ultimate mobsters in *Black Rain* (1989). The Japanese businessman was vilified in *Rising Sun* (1993). The stingy Korean shopkeeper got his due in *Falling Down* (1993). Unfortunately, the list goes on.

Asian American Filmmaking

In reaction to Hollywood's many irresponsible depictions, Asian American filmmakers continue to reclaim the Asian American image. Three organizations have been essential in that effort, beginning with Visual Communications (VC), founded in 1970 in Los Angeles as a

community organization promoting media arts by and about Asian Americans. Asian CineVue (ACV) followed six years later in New York, supporting the production and exhibition of Asian American media, including the founding of the Asian American International Film Festival which today is the longest-running Asian American film festival in the country. In San Francisco, the National Asian American Telecommunications Association (NAATA) was established in 1980 to fund, produce, and distribute films that encompass the diversity of Asian America. NAATA also sponsors the annual San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival. Film festivals, especially Asian American-specific film festivals, proved to be a remarkable venue for reaching inquisitive, growing audiences. In recent years, Asian- and Asian American-centered festivals have sprouted in cities throughout the country, including Honolulu, Seattle, Los Angeles, San Diego, Washington, Chicago, and Dallas. Furthermore, the watchdog group Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA) was founded in 1992 to monitor portrayals of Asian Americans in the media so that damaging stereotypes do not go unnoticed and unprotested by the public.

The advent of these media-specific organizations marked a major milestone in Asian Americans in film. In addition to media organizations, Asian American actors proved to be some of the most effective advocates for more accurate Asian American representation. Walking a fine line between not perpetuating stereotypes and the artistic and economic need to work, the post-World War II generation of Asian American actors, among them Mako, Soon-Tek Oh, Sab Shimono, James Shigeta, James Hong, Wood Moy, Nobu McCarthy, and Beulah Quo, gave voice to the fight against demeaning roles. In more recent years, distinctive actors such as Kelvin Han Yee, Lane Nishikawa, John Lone, Amy Hill, Jodi Long, Joan Chen, Dennis Dun, and Rosalind Chao remained committed to the

fight. Together, they helped reclaim the Asian American image.

One of those initial reclamations was Duane Kubo and Robert A. Nakamura's first all-Asian American full-length film, *Hito Hata: Raise the Banner* (1980), which captured the contributions and hardships of Japanese Americans since the early 1900s through the life of an immigrant Japanese laborer, Oda, played by the veteran actor/director Mako. The film opens with a wizened Oda and his elderly friends—all men without families kept single by the long-lasting exclusionary immigration laws—who are out in Little Tokyo celebrating Nisei Week. Through flashbacks, the film traces Oda's experiences from a Southern Pacific railroad worker to his experiences as a community organizer struggling to keep developers from destroying the affordable residential hotels that are home to a generation of elderly single Japanese American men. From a young disadvantaged immigrant to an old man fighting for his rights, the character Oda bore absolutely no resemblance to the fake, Hollywood-created Asians and Asian Americans.

One year later came Wayne Wang's debut, *Chan Is Missing*, about a Chinese American cabbie and his nephew's search for a friend who has gone missing with \$4,000 of their savings. On the surface, *Chan* is a clever detective story without an easy ending. But starting with the film's title—an obvious reference to the fake Charlie Chans populating the screens, including Peter Ustinov in the title role of *Charlie Chan and Curse of the Dragon Queen* just one year earlier—Wang's film is also a definitive statement about Asian Americans in film. In Wang's world, Chan is truly of Chinese descent. But just as the true Chan was never found—much less seen—in Hollywood's versions, so, too, must he remain missing in Wang's version. Because Chan is missing, his Asian American friends and relatives must continue to search for him, just as Asian Americans must continue to search for fair and accurate representation in film and elsewhere.

Social politics aside, Wang made an inventive, enjoyable film—which also marked the birth of the independent Asian American film movement. *Chan Is Missing* remains one of the most widely distributed Asian American titles in film history. Wang went on to direct *Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart* (1984), now a classic about the relationship between an Asian American mother and daughter, and *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1989), based on the novel by Louis Chu about a young couple in Chinatown starting their lives together. Then came *Joy Luck Club* (1993), based on Amy Tan's best-selling novel and still the only major Hollywood studio-made film specifically about a slice of the Asian American experience, featuring a stellar Asian American cast. The mother-daughter relationship, which was at the heart of the film, proved a resonating theme with all audiences, regardless of ethnic makeup. Indeed mothers and daughters have intricate, complicated relationships in any culture, and in *Joy Luck Club*, those mothers and daughters happened to be Asian American. Given its universal theme, the film was a bona fide hit—and remains the only Asian American-themed film, made by and with Asian Americans, from a major Hollywood studio.

In addition, documentary filmmaking by Asian Americans grew especially quickly with great strength, led by such seminal works as *Unfinished Business* (1985) by Steven Okazaki and *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1988) by Christine Choy and Renee Tajima-Peña. Stories of immigration, internment, isolation and separation, family history, and first-person narratives emerged and multiplied. Gone were the stereotypes: Asian Americans told their Asian American stories in earnest, with Asian American themes and subjects played out by Asian American actors. Asian American filmmakers continued to fracture and break out of Hollywood's suffocating molds while winning Hollywood's accolades including several Academy Awards: Steven Okazaki for *Days of Waiting* in 1990, Frieda Lee Mock for *Maya Lin: A*

Strong Clear Vision in 1994, Jessica Yu for *Breathing Lessons* in 1996, Chris Tashima for *Visas and Virtue* in 1997, and Keiko Ibi for *The Personals: Improvisations on Romance in the Golden Years* in 1998.

Asian American filmmakers also found success with a hybrid form that was part history and part feature film. One of the most successful titles is Kayo Hatta's *Picture Bride* (1995), which introduced the picture-bride phenomenon to mainstream audiences. Between 1908 and 1924, more than twenty thousand Asian women arrived in Hawaii to marry immigrant plantation workers, sight unseen, with the exception of a single, often aged photograph sent by the bridegroom back to the home country in hopes of a making a long-distance match. The film focuses on the relationship between young, expectant Riyo, who arrives in Hawaii in 1918 to marry weathered, hard-working Matsuji, who is twenty years older than his photograph. A beautifully rendered, tender film, *Picture Bride* follows the relationship that blossoms between the mismatched pair while offering a glimpse of immigration life in the early twentieth century.

Today, the latest feature films are just on the cusp of breakout superstardom, led by Justin Lin's *Better Luck Tomorrow*, which won international acclaim for its depiction a group of overprivileged Asian American honor students who steal, cheat, lie, and more in their free time. A major success at Sundance 2002, the film was acquired by MTV for national distribution, making Asian American film history along the way: it was not only the first Asian American film ever to be picked up at Sundance, but it also became the first film ever—regardless of ethnic background—purchased for distribution by MTV Films.

At a question-and-answer session following a Sundance screening, Lin was criticized by a film critic for making “such a bleak, negative, amoral film,” referring to the film's main characters, the Ivy-bound boys gone amok. “Don't you have a responsibility to paint a more posi-

tive and helpful portrait of your community?" the critic demanded. Lin replied that he made the film he wanted to make, that what he depicted was a reality among teenagers of any ethnicity. Then came *Chicago Sun-Times* film critic Roger Ebert (he of international thumbs-up fame), to Lin's defense, later devoting a column to the Sundance incident. "You would never make a comment like that to a white filmmaker," Ebert chastised the detractor. "If Justin Lin had a responsibility to 'his community,' it was to make the best film he possibly could," Ebert wrote—which certainly earned him countless thumbs-up from many communities.

Better Luck Tomorrow owes its success, in part, to previous, smaller, no less notable films that capture Asian American life, with an emphasis on the "American." Whether coming-of-age in Los Angeles on the eve of graduation for eight teenagers in Chris Chan Lee's *Yellow* (1996); or finding unexpected connections between a lonely gay man, a quirky waitress and a distraught housewife in Quentin Lee and Justin Lin's *Shopping for Fangs* (1997); or a final-year medical student coping with the demands of his domineering mother in Francisco Alwalas's *Disoriented* (1997); or two young men spending a last summer together before they go their separate ways in Michael Idemoto and Eric Nakamura's *Sunsets* (1997); or a straight-faced, Tony Award-winning playwright David Henry Hwang irreverently hawking porn featuring "positive images of confident Asian-American men and women" in Greg Pak's parody *Asian Porn Pride* (1999), today's Asian American films are best described as just films—that happen to be populated with Asian American characters, crafted by makers whose ethnic background is Asian American.

Moreover, with growing interest in the foreign-film market, especially films from Asia, the definition of Asian American film has blurred and grown. The commercial success of Asian directors such as Zhang Yimou (*Red Sorghum*, 1991; *Raise the Red Lantern*, 1997) and

Chen Kaige (*Farewell My Concubine*, 1993), along with the luminous actress Gong Li, has created a new and viable celluloid niche. Additionally, the 1997 Hong Kong handover sent reverberations through Hollywood, as seen in the box-office success of Hong Kong director John Woo and his blockbusters *Broken Arrow* (1995), *Face/Off* (1997), *Mission: Impossible 2* (2000), and, most recently, *Windtalkers* (2002). Jackie Chan is the comic answer to the Dragon—although one still has to ask, how come he never gets the girl? The phenomenal success of in-between Asian/Asian Americans such as Asian-born, U.S.-educated, U.S.-domiciled directors Ang Lee and Mira Nair further blurs the lines of Asian American film. Regardless of definitions, the phenomenal success of Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* (2002)—that the former film won an Academy Award for best foreign film speaks volumes—can only further the efforts of Asian Americans working in film.

The latest crop of Asian American actors, too, have benefited from the Asian crossovers: the most visible, such as Tamlyn Tomita, Margaret Cho, Ming-Na Wen, Rick Yune, Russell Wong, Jason Scott Lee, John Cho, Eddie Shin, Garrett Wang, Keiko Agena, B. D. Wong, Alec Mapa, and Sandra Oh, have been joined by the likes of Chow Yun Fat, Michelle Yeoh, Bai Ling, Zhang Ziyi, and Tsui Hark, to name but a few.

Ironically, with growing exposure, the most successful Asian American directors have taken on projects that are out of the Asian American realm and are of the so-called Hollywood mainstream: Wayne Wang with *Smoke* (1995) and *Maid in Manhattan* (2003), Joan Chen with *Autumn in New York* (2002), Ang Lee with *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), *The Ice Storm* (1997), and *The Hulk* (2003). The criticism has been unnecessarily harsh. Asian American filmmakers, like any others, deserve to choose their projects. Would Steven Spielberg be attacked for not making only Jewish-centered films?

Clearly and steadily, the new generation of Asian American filmmakers, directors, producers, and actors and a growing Asian American audience are helping to dismantle Hollywood-created, Hollywood-insisted images of what it means to be Asian and Asian American. Certainly more progress needs to be

made. In a Hollywood-dominated celluloid industry, Asian Americans are still facing the same challenges they did a hundred years ago—the lack of opportunity coupled with the denial of accurate representation. But lest that glass be considered half-empty, be assured: we've come a long way, baby.

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Picture Bride (1995, F)
Sa-I-Gu: From Korean Women's Perspectives (1993, D)
Salaam Bombay! (1988, F)
Shopping for Fangs (1997, F)
Slaying the Dragon (1988, D)
Sunsets (1997, F)
Unfinished Business (1985, D)
Visas and Virtue (1997, D)
Walk Like a Dragon (1960, F)
Who Killed Vincent Chin? (1988, D)
Yellow (1996, F)

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