

2018

East Asian "China Doll" or "Dragon Lady"?

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Recommended Citation

Lee, Joey. 2018. "East Asian "China Doll" or "Dragon Lady"?" *Bridges: An Undergraduate Journal of Contemporary Connections* 3, (1). http://scholars.wlu.ca/bridges_contemporary_connections/vol3/iss1/2

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Hollywood and American media corporations have long claimed the creation of universal truth and grand narratives. As such, their representation of people of East Asian descent is problematic because it uses “physical, social, and psychological distancing” (Wang 2013, 77) as a method of presenting a mythological “Other” to establish European and American imperial dominance. Additionally, colonialists created and exploited society’s “yellow peril”, a fear of the “threatening, taking over, invading, or negatively ‘Asianizing’ U.S. society and culture” (Kim 2013, 22) in popular media to develop a culture of paranoid xenophobia. They did so through popularizing the two Hollywood archetypes of the submissive, delicate, and overly emotional China Doll, and the threatening, cold Dragon Lady, popular media produces binary representations of East Asian women. This forces them to be either soft and docile, or hard and aggressive, without space for anything complex or human in the middle ground. The representation of East Asian women in popular media is harmful through its exaggerated portrayal of the China Doll and Dragon Lady to further exoticize and dehumanize East Asian women, ultimately ensuring the dominance of the West.

One undying representation of East Asian women in Western media and culture is the dainty China Doll or the diminutive Butterfly. This docile archetype infantilizes and hypersexualizes the diverse communities of people of Asian descent, suggesting a demand for White domination. After the Opium Wars opened trade channels to East Asia, particularly in China and Japan (Holcombe 2017, 230), Western colonialists engaged in Orientalism by mythologizing the East based on fantasies of the Other. As their first encounters with Japanese women were with those trapped by military sex work (Wood 2009, 238), their understanding of Asia and East Asian women were of sex and service. Europeans brought home their colonial fantasies of pale, fragile, and diminutive Asian women, and continued circulating these images to ensure the certainty of their ownership and domination over the East. Xing (1998) argues that “The Orient was almost a European invention” (168), becoming a distant land of romance, danger, criminal experiences, and essentially a place in which White people were privileged with entering and exiting to escape their burdens. Like their land, East Asian women were also idealized as an experience to enter and exit without consequences. Anna May Wong, a pioneering East Asian actress, whose film legacy was memorialized by “a thousand deaths”, and ‘for whom the twin legacies of “dragon lady” and “butterfly” were lived down within her own lifetime and influenced numerous American screen Chinese portrayals in later days’ (Wang 2013, 76). Wong’s career as a Chinese Butterfly in film is characterized by her portrayal of “slave girls, prostitutes, temptresses, and doomed lovers” (Wang 2013, 78), repeated images of subordination that built the foundation for the way Western culture would come to view and understand East Asian women as dependent and innately servile. Wong stated “after my death, my tombstone should engrave the words 'she died a thousand deaths'” (Wang 2013, 78), referencing her life on screen as representing the stereotypical Asian woman who is repeatedly killed off due to failed interracial romances. Liu (2000) explains that these characters “conveniently elect” suicide to avoid challenging the happiness and success of their White lovers (25), building the imagination of colonial dominance over the subordinate East Asia. In essence, screen Asians prioritize the lives of White characters and disappear when they are unneeded.

The do-or-die interracial relationship trope is repeated continuously throughout mainstream film and theatre. In the extremely popular *Madame Butterfly* and *Miss Saigon*, the Asian woman character commits suicide after the love affair with her White partner ends.

Through this popularization of tragic lover, the role of the Asian woman in Western media is to “fulfill White men’s desires; when their lovers leave they disappear” (Shim 1998, 389), emphasizing the Asian person’s background role in their own narrative. Even while they are alive, Asian women have seemingly no power in their lives and relationships, as is exemplified in *The World of Suzie Wong*. Suzie contentedly agrees to stay with her White lover “for as long as he wants her around” (Wang 2013, 78). The East Asian tragic Butterfly character knows herself as the last priority of a White man’s life, and is content with simply fulfilling his desires as long as he wants her. Her role, as she only exists as long as his desire for her exists, is service and obedience, and when it is time for him to return to his superior White world, she must disappear without a trace as a last task to ease his guilt and purge his sin.

In the media, White male characters exploit the diminutive obedience and servile desire of the China Doll archetypal character repetitively, normalizing the use of Asian women for selfish gain. Lomax in *The World of Suzie Wong* explains that he wants to marry Suzie as an escape from the mundane patterns of life; if he married an English girl, he would have been confined to a well-worn path (Wang 2013, 77). However, by rescuing his China Doll, he transgresses the trap of his social circle to enter the realm of the exciting exotic. Through the permeation and normalization of Orientalism and the imaginary exotic of the East in popular media, White men continue to believe cities such as Saigon, Casablanca, and Hong Kong are an escape from the mundane, and an entrance to a realm of consequence-free adventure and romance (Marchetti 1993). Farrer (2010) continues to state that Shanghai is still seen as a “sexual paradise for western men” (70), and “dating Chinese women was seen as the best way for men to get to know China and learn Chinese” (82). The exploitation of East Asian women’s labour is clear outside of the media, as the domination of women parallels the exploration of her country and the use of her body as a vessel of exploration. The yellow peril is eased by the apparent objectification of East Asian women, so that the formerly threatening people are transformed into tools supporting White imperial supremacy.

The portrayal of East Asian women as hypersexual, commodified, liminal spaces is also shown in the 2001 movie *Rush Hour 2*. The connotation of Asian women in the service industry, highlighted by the implication of an all-female operated “Heaven on Earth Massage Parlor”, generates a setting teeming with sexual innuendo. Shu (2003) describes the scene as an “unnecessary moment that objectifies young Asian women as passive, obedient, and eager to pamper any man” (58). Asian women are literally presented to Lee and Carter; they are revealed by the two owners who pull back the sliding doors, their hands positioned as if they are revealing goods to an audience (Chan 2001). The women presented are scantily dressed in outfits that conceal little more than lingerie would. These China Dolls are costumed to highlight their sexual features and suggest that they would be easily undressed and accessible. The way the East Asian women behave is also hypersexual; they try to catch the male and audience attention through suggestive poses and winks, writhing in their seats, and pouting slightly when they are not chosen, as if they are jealous children. When the owners open the door to the selection of women, they are lined up as if they are products in a market for the male gaze and his audience to select. The owner even states, “You pick any girl” (Chan 2001), completely handing over the women’s autonomy and consent to Carter and Lee, and suggesting viewers take their pick as well. These women are nameless, subordinate products; they are only addressed as “that one” or “you right here” because they do not carry enough significance to be regarded as humans in the movie. When Lee tries to interrupt, Carter states, “You don’t jump in front of a black man in a

buffet line”, and the owner replies with, “Your friend have big appetite” (Chan 2001), cementing the portrayal of East Asian women as profitable, consumable products that lack autonomy and consent. It is also important to acknowledge that the director of *Rush Hour 2*, Brett Ratner, is currently facing at least six allegations of sexual harassment (CBCNews 2017), uncovering the real impact of the objectification and hypersexualization of women in and within media.

In regards to modern magazine media, Sengupta (2006) argues that differentiating women as a separate demographic signifies that femininity "requires explicit instruction" (800), which “shape[s] images and definitions of femininity that are designed to inform the readers’ understanding of womanhood” (799). Sengupta (2006) explains that by being active in the mainstream and claiming to represent the public (801), popular media images allow magazines to claim their stereotypical images of femininity as social truth (Currie 1997, 453). The universality of print demonstrates the significance of the study of marginalized women in popular media, as visibly racialized girls and women must compare themselves not only to the unattainable categorization of “woman”, but also “whiteness”. Sengupta (2006) found that while White women were featured as “sexy or sensual beauty types, Asian women were more likely to be portrayed as cute and girlish” when they were represented at all (801). Although still sexualized in popular print media, East Asian women are unable to grow out of the “cute, girly” trope, locking the diverse communities of people into infantile images, further widening the autonomy and power differences between the East and West.

The opposite representation of East Asian women in popular media is that of the aggressive, sensual Dragon Lady, who is posed first as a challenge to Western power, but quickly brought to submission to ensure White dominance. This characterization is of an inhuman robot that is unfeeling, savage, sexual, and absolutely self-serving. Wang (2013) describes the birth of the Dragon Lady in *Daughter of the Dragon* as the depiction of a “scheming, murderous, other-worldly beauty who killed coldly and mercilessly” (75) for her own will. In response, Sakamoto (1987) poses the question, “Why should we (screen Chinese) always scheme, rob, kill?”, and continues to critique that “[viewers] got so weary of [...] the scenarist's concept of Chinese characters” (1). The Dragon Lady’s characteristics oppose that of the China Doll; while the Doll is selfless and serving, the Dragon is selfish and brutal. Her sexuality comes from the exaggeration of her selfishness in combination with her connection to her other base desires. As she is self-serving and fiercely beautiful, she is sexually selfish and will engage in seduction to get what she wants at any cost. Despite the loss of her humanity, the Dragon Lady archetype is an improvement over the China Doll due to her seemingly powerful independence and refusal to bow down.

However, White screen characters are still written to dominate this one-track-minded powerful woman. Wang (2013) points out that in *Year of the Dragon*, the character Tracy Tzu, a tribute to the real Empress Dragon Lady of China, is depicted as a “classic, exotic seductress of the married Mr. White” (76). Not only is her name a direct homage to the ancient empress of the 1800s (Wang 2013, 76), further historicizing East Asian women, but she channels her sexual prowess onto a married man, who is depicted as helpless to her exotic charms. Her disrespect for marriage and his White wife demonstrates not only her selfishness and lack of morality, but the competition between women of the East and West for the gaze of White men. Further on in their love affair, Tracy’s independence and Dragon strength is stripped by Mr. White, so that she is forced to become the submissive China Doll. He “rips her clothes, [...] threatens to rape her [...] moves in with her, verbally and physically abuses her, tells her how to do her job, and takes

away her independence” (Wang 2013, 78). This results in abuse, colonization of her space, dehumanization, and transforming her into a body to be used. The movie includes scenes of Tzu walking around in her apartment topless or entirely naked, encouraging the gaze of audience members to sexualize and dehumanize her. Wang (2013) states that there is no doubt that while Tracy is “Chinese-American, well-off, and well-educated, [she] is a representation of Asia that must submit to the dominance of White” (78). Mr. White explicitly states, “I’m tired of Chinese this and Chinese that. Does the fact that bribery, extortion, and murder have been going on for a thousand years make it kosher? Well, this is America, which is two hundred years old, so you’d better adjust your clocks” (Wang 2013, 78). Mr. White’s dialogue provides and reinforces peril and fear-mongering stereotypes of the East’s greed and crime, as well as entitling White America to dominance over the seemingly savage and criminal culture. The aggressive Asian woman is constructed as a challenge to White culture, whose defiance is quickly, rightfully, and brutally brought to heel. The Dragon Lady stereotype is related to the yellow peril; the fear of Asian dominance. They continue to explain the politicization of popular film as the rise of Japanese economic power in the 1980s paralleled the increase of films portraying Japanese characters as “greedy, ambitious, and covertly scheming to control the U.S.” (Kim 2013, 23). The threat of the East Asian Dragon Lady is emphasized to alarm and challenge the public, but is quickly quenched by White power to reassure and reinforce the dominance of Western culture.

In magazine media, Taylor, Lee, and Stern (1995) find that when there is Asian representation, they are disproportionately high in technology, business, and science advertisements, although typically set as background figures (619). Sengupta (2006) argues that such a stereotypical representation in a particular stream of advertisements sets unrealistic expectations for Asian folks to excel in work and education fields (801). This portrayal of East Asians contributes to the social stereotype that entire diverse communities of people are automatically “hardworking, well educated, and talented in math and science (Taylor, Lee, and Stern 1995, 619) rather than complex individuals who work to integrate into society and build success in a flawed system. Like the Dragon Lady, these seemingly positive portrayals of Asian models dehumanize them into “all work and no play” non-social creatures.

The ongoing toxic portrayal of East Asian women in popular media as the China Doll and Dragon Lady ultimately perpetuates Othering and the dehumanization of East Asian women to ensure the dominance of the West. Rather than restricting the marginalized group to toxic binary stereotypes, Xing (1998) suggests that “Asian characters can be emotional, political, and fallible. They could laugh, cry, and swear... They [can be] ordinary human beings” (229). Despite the gradual growing presence of East Asian people in contemporary popular media, it is clear that Western culture still has much to learn about cultivating complex characters without the restriction of background roles, stereotypes, whitening, and peril.

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