

From Charlie Chan to *The karate kid*—changing perceptions of oriental style

Recent Hollywood action and science fiction movies are helping shape new images of East Asia, says JANE CHI HYUN PARK.

In her 1999 comeback show, *I'm the one that I want*, Korean–American comedian Margaret Cho humorously laments the fact that the only role models she had growing up were the extras loading the trucks in the TV show *M*A*S*H*.

Later, Cho more seriously attributes some of her lack of self-confidence as the star of the first Asian–American sitcom, *All-American girl*, and the show's subsequent failure, to the dearth of well-developed representations of East Asians in US popular culture.

Cho's observation gestures toward a long history in the American entertainment industry, of East Asian people, places and cultures being relegated to the margins as in the *M*A*S*H* example; caricaturised in recycled stereotypes such as the evil Dragon Lady and Fu Manchu and their docile counterparts, Lotus Blossom and Charlie Chan; and rendered exotic objects of the Western gaze in films such as *Memoirs of a geisha*, *Lost in translation*, and *The forbidden kingdom*.

This history and its present-day repercussions are chronicled in a number of academic studies since the 1970s that discuss how Asians have been stereotyped in US film and television. While importantly pointing out the existence of demeaning and often racist images, this approach also inadvertently perpetuates what cultural scholar Kobena Mercer has called the 'burden of representation'.

Mercer was referring to the ways in which Black British artists were expected to depict African diasporic identity and experience in the most positive light for mainstream audiences—an expectation that arose as much from within Black communities as well as outside them. What may seem like the honour of representing one's 'people', however, actually places non-white artists, much like

women or queer artists, in a tricky bind. Their work will either be seen as faithfully representing their particular 'culture' (an impossible task given the diversity within groups and the dynamism of cultures) or shirking their ethical duty by 'selling out'.



Ralph Macchio punches Pat Morita in a scene from *The karate kid*.

seen as a given, rather than something to be constantly proved.

It is, of course, important to note that non-minority artists or academics, for that matter, are not expected to carry this burden because the complex humanity of their group—the dominant group—is seen as a given, rather than something to be constantly proved. In my first book, *Yellow future: oriental style in Hollywood cinema*, recently published with the University of Minnesota Press, I use a slightly different approach to tackle this problem, and the lack of representational diversity that gives rise to it in the first place. Rather than looking for 'positive' or 'negative' stereotypes in films that thematically foreground East Asia, I chose instead to focus on the critically underexplored ways that East Asia, since the 1980s, has become prominent as a symbol of technology and postmodern futurity in the backdrop of many Hollywood action and science fiction movies.

Examples include the dystopic global cities of *Blade runner*, *Black rain*, and *The matrix*; the self-orientalising performances of Asian-American actors such as Gedde Watanabe in *Gung ho* and Pat Morita in *The karate kid*; and the now requisite martial arts action sequences featuring actors and actresses of different ethnicities in the *Rush hour* series, *Ghost dog*, *Kill Bill*, and *Batman begins*.

I argue that these allusions reduce many different Asian cultures, Continued page 16>>

Changing perceptions of oriental style

<<Continued from page 15 histories and aesthetics into a small number of easily recognisable, often interchangeable images that both reflect and help to shape changing attitudes about East Asia in the US.



Kill Bill—martial arts action sequences featuring actors and actresses of different ethnicities.

The process and product of this reduction I call 'oriental style'—a term that draws on and extends Edward Said's model of orientalism by shifting the temporal and geographical

contexts of his classic study to look at contemporary American media representations of East Asia. It also illuminates aspects of orientalism that have been relatively under-theorised such as fascination for the so-called 'other', complicity on the part of that 'other', and the multilateral networks of cultural exchange through which West and East come to meet in an increasingly mediated world.

The desire for and identification with the 'Orient' is expressed in the narrative structure, production design, and ideological messages of these films as well as in the contexts of their production and critical reception. I trace this shift in film depictions of East Asia to three major economic and cultural developments in the US: the economic rise of Japan and the newly industrialised economies in the 1980s; the growing popularity of Japanese *anime* and Hong Kong action and kung fu films in the 1990s; and the increased presence of Asian bodies and cultures in what media scholar Lisa Nakamura has called 'cosmetic multiculturalism', or the general trend in popular media to flatten and commodify ethnic, racial, and gender differences for mainstream consumption.

These developments culminate in what appears initially as a solution to the problem of Asian media invisibility with which I opened this essay. Yet it is also important to remember that increased cultural presence does not necessarily correspond to increased power in the

public sphere or to the evolution of more inclusive models of representation. A case in point is *The Cho show*, a recent pseudo-reality TV show in which Margaret Cho starred once again, this time wielding much more creative control. However, as much as *All-American girl* forced the actress to conform to certain stereotypes of the 'model minority', *The Cho show* continued to engage, and to a large extent perpetuated these stereotypes, especially in its uncritical celebration of the American Dream and the comic caricatures of Cho's parents as perpetual foreigners.

In future research I hope to critically examine how diasporic Asian media players like Cho negotiate entertainment industries in the US, Asia and the Pacific to produce new, hybrid forms of oriental style.



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India's prospects in the post-crisis world

An international expert on global finance will give a public lecture on India's prospects in the postmodern world, at the Australian National University on 29 November.

Mr Montek Singh Ahluwalia is the Deputy Commissioner of the Planning Commission of the Government of India and the author of numerous publications and articles.

The yearly oration is given by a distinguished Indian public figure to enhance and promote understanding and friendship between India and Australia.

Mr Ahluwalia has served as Special Secretary to the Prime Minister of India and Finance Secretary in the Ministry of Finance. In 2001, he was appointed as the first Director of the Independent Evaluation Office at the International Monetary Fund, resigning in 2004 to take up his present appointment on the planning commission.

See Diary Notes, page 31