

**A memo from MANAA to Hollywood:  
ASIAN STEREOTYPES**

**Restrictive Portrayals of Asians in the Media and How to Balance  
Them**

For decades, American entertainment media have defined the Asian image to all the world. And usually, that image has been shaped by people with little understanding of Asian people themselves--and with little foresight into how such images would impact the Asian American community. Despite the good intentions of individual producers and filmmakers, limited and unbalanced portrayals of Asians have traditionally been the norm in the entertainment industry.

Too often, an Asian face or accent is presented as a shorthand symbol for anything antithetical to American or Western culture. Too often, no distinctions are made between Asian Americans--acculturated U.S. citizens with deep roots in this nation--and Asian nationals who may or may not have any loyalty to the United States. Too often, the media insinuate that Asian Americans don't belong in their own country.

Not all Hollywood projects with Asians are objectionable, however. In fact, some Hollywood movies--such as "Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story" and "The Joy Luck Club"--have been widely welcomed by Asian American audiences. But Hollywood typically restricts its portrayals of Asians to a limited range of clichéd stock characters. And this has affected how Asian Americans are perceived and treated in the broader society.

Below is a list of restrictive Asian portrayals that are constantly repeated in the mainstream media and an explanation of why each is objectionable. The seemingly incessant recurrence of these depictions--coupled with the paucity of compensating images--marks them as stereotypes. So, a portrayal can act as a stereotype even if its creator doesn't intend it to. Each description is followed by a "Stereotype-Buster" that can combat the inaccuracies of such portrayals.

This list is not intended as a bunch of "thou shalt nots" designed to inhibit the creative imagination. To the contrary, it is designed to encourage Hollywood's creative minds to think in new directions--to help our storytellers create more interesting roles for actors by avoiding old, stale images. It proposes to open up powerful and profitable story ideas previously overlooked.

In short, this list hopes to help Hollywood prosper by embracing a more inclusive vision of the human community.

Asian Americans as foreigners who cannot be assimilated. Because they are racially and culturally distinctive from the American mainstream, Asian people have been widely seen as unable to be absorbed into American society. According to this view, anything Asian is thus inherently "alien" to America. This is reflected in the media by the disproportionate number of unacculturated Asian characters speaking with foreign accents. Acculturated Asian American personalities have sometimes even been portrayed as unassimilated (such as radio comedians satirizing Judge Lance Ito with an inappropriate foreign accent). This portrayal ultimately suggests that anything Asian must remain apart from American society. However, the descendants of Asian immigrants have acculturated themselves not only to the United States but also to non-Asian societies throughout the world: Europe, Australia, Latin America, Africa.

**Stereotype-Buster:** Portraying Asians as an integral part of the United States. More portrayals of acculturated Asian Americans speaking without foreign accents.

Asian cultures as inherently predatory. For decades, Americans have viewed Asian immigrants as "taking" from this country without giving anything back. This perception was reinforced by early laws making it difficult for Asians to immigrate and impossible for them to become naturalized citizens. Although these laws have since been repealed, the image of the Asian as alien predator still infuses popular media. In the movie "Falling Down," for example, the white main character accuses a Korean grocer of draining American resources without bothering to fit into American society. This accusation "justifies" the lead character's destruction of the Korean's grocery store. Similarly, the movie "Rising Sun" portrays Japanese businessmen taking over American industry by murder and deceit. And countless movies and TV episodes have portrayed Chinatowns as breeding grounds of crime.

**Stereotype-Buster:** Asians as positive contributors to American society.

Asian Americans restricted to clichéd occupations. Asians and Asian Americans make their living in a wide array of professions, but too often, Asian American professionals are depicted in a limited and predictable range of jobs: restaurant workers, Korean grocers, Japanese businessmen, Indian cab drivers, TV anchorwomen, martial artists, gangsters, faith healers, laundry workers, and prostitutes. This misrepresents the diversity of the Asian American work force.

**Stereotype-Buster:** Asian Americans in diverse, mainstream occupations: doctors, lawyers, therapists, educators, U.S. soldiers, etc.

Asian racial features, names, accents, or mannerisms as inherently comic or sinister. Because distinctive Asian characteristics are less common in the United States, movies and TV shows often fall back on them for quick and easy gags or gasps. For example, the thick accent of the goofy Chinese exchange student in "Sixteen Candles"--who is given the sophomoric name "Long Duk Dong"--is used for cheap laughs, while the numerous Fu Manchu movies have presented the Asian character's culturally distinctive speech and appearance as emblems of unfathomable evil.

**Stereotype-Buster:** Asian names or racial features as no more "unusual" than those of whites.

Asians relegated to supporting roles in projects with Asian or Asian American content. Usually, when a project features Asian subject matter, the main character will still be white. "The Killing Fields" and "Seven Years in Tibet" are only two efforts that follow this "rule." But the most infamous example is the internment-camp movie "Come See the Paradise" (a box-office flop), which misleadingly focused on a white protagonist and pushed its more interesting Japanese American characters into the background of their own history. However, the success of "Gandhi," "The Last Emperor," and "The Joy Luck Club" proves that mainstream audiences will pay to see Asian and Asian American lead characters. Using Asian American protagonists can even create more interesting and uncommon story ideas.

**Stereotype-Buster:** More Asian and Asian American lead roles.

Asian male sexuality as negative or non-existent. Although Asian women are frequently portrayed as positive romantic partners for white men ("Sayonara," "The World of Suzie Wong," ad infinitum), Asian men are almost never positively paired with women of any race. Western society still seems to view Asian male sexuality as a problem. Consequently, Asian men are usually presented either as threatening corrupters of white women or as eunuchs lacking any romantic feelings. For example, in the action movie "Showdown in Little Tokyo," the Asian villain forces himself upon a white woman and murders her before threatening the Asian female love interest. Predictably, the white hero kills the Asian villain and "wins" the Asian woman--while the hero's Amerasian sidekick is given no love life at all.

**Stereotype-Buster:** More Asian men as positive romantic leads.

Unmotivated white-Asian romance. In "Daughter of the Dragon," the daughter of Fu Manchu lays her eyes on a British detective and instantly falls in love with him. "The Bounty" and "Come See the Paradise" also contain scenes where an Asian woman falls in love with a white man at first sight. The repetition of this conceit sends the signal that Asian women are romantically attracted to white men because they are white. It insinuates that whiteness is inherently more important than any other romantic quality and inherently more appealing than any other skin color.

**Stereotype-Buster:** Interracial romances should be as well-motivated and well-developed as same-race romances.

Asian women as "China dolls." Asian women are often portrayed as exotic, subservient, compliant, industrious, eager to please. While nicknamed the "China doll," "geisha girl," or "lotus blossom," this sexually loaded stereotype isn't restricted to Chinese or Japanese women. This portrayal is epitomized by the self-effacing title character of the opera "Madame Butterfly," but it can also be seen in works like "Teahouse of the August Moon" and "Tai-Pan."

**Stereotype-Buster:** Asian women as self-confident and self-respecting, pleasing themselves as well as their loved ones.

Asian women as "dragon ladies." Another major female stereotype views Asian women as inherently scheming, untrustworthy, and back-stabbing. This portrayal is nicknamed the "dragon lady," after the Asian villainess in the vintage comic strip "Terry and the Pirates." Other examples of the stereotype are the daughter of Fu Manchu (in numerous books and movies) and the gangsters' molls in "The Year of the Dragon."

**Stereotype-Buster:** Whenever villains are Asian, it's important that their villainy not be attributed to their ethnicity.

Asians who prove how good they are by sacrificing their lives. In the "classic" movie "Gunga Din" (1939), the Indian water-carrier of the title confirms his loyalty to the Imperial British army by warning it of an attack by nationalist forces. Gunga Din is killed in the onslaught. For decades afterwards, movies have portrayed "positive" Asian characters affirming their loyalty to the lead white characters--and thereby affirming their "goodness"--by sacrificing themselves so that the white characters may live. This depiction has come to be known as the "Gunga Din stereotype." It can still be seen in projects as recent as "Shogun," "The Year of the Dragon," and "Rising Sun." Despite the intentions of the various filmmakers, the constant repetition of this portrayal suggests that Asian life isn't as valuable as white life. More cynically, this portrayal may be seen as a more insidious

way of saying: "The only good Asian is a dead Asian."

**Stereotype-Buster:** Positive Asian characters who are still alive at the end of the story.

Asian Americans as the "model minority." Upon hearing the Asian American community's concerns over media images, some producers have made a good-faith effort to create more positive portrayals. Unfortunately, some of these portrayals go too far in the other direction, depicting Asians as so flawless that they are robbed of any humanity. In particular, the image of Asian Americans as over-achievers with little emotional life (such as the Asian American classmate in the canceled TV sitcom "Pearl") can be just as confining and dehumanizing as any overtly negative portrayal. No one is calling for Asian characters to be sanitized of all shortcomings, just for them to be portrayed as well-rounded, relatable human beings.

**Stereotype-Buster:** The audience empathizing with an Asian character's flaws and foibles.

Asianness as an "explanation" for the magical or supernatural. Asia is often used as a quick and convenient reason for something having magical or supernatural properties. For years, the radio hero "The Shadow" was said to have acquired his powers of invisibility from "the mysterious East." No further explanation was necessary. More recently, the Woody Allen movie "Alice" accounted for the magical powers of an elixir by having the white title character buy it from an Asian herbalist. Assumption: Asian cultures are so strange and unknowable that they can defy the physical realities of the Western world. Granted, Asian magic can sometimes be portrayed positively in fiction. But without more realistic images to provide balance, this other-worldly conception of Asia risks painting a mystifying and misleading picture of Asian cultures and Asian people.

**Stereotype-Buster:** Asian cultures as no more or less magical than other cultures.

Anti-Asian racial slurs going unchallenged. Words such as "chink," "Chinaman," "Jap," "Nip," "gook," "slope," "slant-eye," and "wog" are offensive to most Asian Americans. Unfortunately, not all non-Asians recognize the offensiveness of these terms. For example, the movie "Absolute Power" has one of its heroes use the word "Chinaman" in an off-handed manner.

**Stereotype-Buster:** If absolutely necessary for a film or TV project, anti-Asian racial slurs should be contextualized as negative and insulting.

Asian arts as negative when practiced by Asians but positive when practiced

by whites. In the silent movie "The Thief of Bagdad," an Asian villain employs magic to conquer the Arabian city, but good-guy Douglas Fairbanks learns the secret of this magic and uses it against the villain. In the film "Rising Sun," Japanese businessmen use their unique Asian philosophy to plot the take-over of a U.S. company, but Sean Connery draws upon his knowledge of this same philosophy to thwart their evil scheme. On TV, an Asian who knows martial arts is likely to be a villain, while a white person who knows martial arts is probably the star of the show. Such portrayals convey the condescending message that Asian arts can be put to positive use only when practiced by white people (or by white actors in lead Asian roles, as in the TV series "Kung Fu").

**Stereotype-Buster:** Culturally distinct Asian skills positively and realistically employed by Asian people.

Lead Asian roles labeled "Amerasian" or "Eurasian" solely to accommodate white actors. Fact: Most projects in the U.S. entertainment industry call for white lead characters. Fact: Hardly any call for Asian lead characters. Fact: White actors have traditionally been considered for Asian lead roles, while Asian actors are almost never considered for white lead roles. Result: White actors have disproportionately more opportunities in the industry than Asian actors do. So, whenever a white actor is cast in a lead Asian role, this perpetuates a racial double standard and diminishes already scarce opportunities for Asian American actors. This situation sparked the heated--and widely misunderstood--casting controversy over the Broadway musical "Miss Saigon." Granted, some actors who are part-Asian but who can pass for white (Keanu Reeves, Jennifer Tilly, "Lois & Clark's" Dean Cain) have greater opportunities, but they cannot be used as a barometer for most Asian American actors.

**Stereotype-Buster:** Until the proverbial playing field is truly level, Asian roles--especially lead roles--should be reserved for Asian actors.

What, no Asians? The movie "Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves" commendably found a place for a prominent black character in the unlikely setting of Medieval England. By contrast, contemporary TV shows set in large cities--"L.A. Law," "Chicago Hope," "Murphy Brown," etc.--don't include a single regular Asian American character. What's wrong with this picture? Asian people live all over the world and in every region of the U.S.

**Stereotype-Buster:** Virtually any project--especially one with a contemporary setting--can make room for Asian characters. And just because a part isn't explicitly written as Asian doesn't necessarily mean that it can't be cast with an Asian actor.

We would be more than happy to answer any questions you may have about

any of these points.

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