

The Evolving Portrayal of Chinese Women in American Film from the Silver Screen to Modern Day

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Abstract: Chinese women have been appearing and starring in American films for over a century. However, the type of portrayals of Chinese women on screen, starting from the 1920's up until now, have evolved greatly. This investigation's objective is to analyze how the portrayal of Chinese Women in American films evolved from one-dimensional stereotypes, such as the "Dragon Lady" and the "Lotus Blossom", to the complex and varied roles offered to Chinese Women today—ranging from princesses to multiverse travelling mothers. The investigation will also examine the historical contexts that brought the harmful and overtly sexualized "Dragon Lady" and "Lotus Blossom" stereotypes to fruition, such as the Page Act of 1875 which prohibited the entry of women of any "oriental" descent into the US, assuming most of them to be prostitutes. This investigation will be done by using landmark films with Chinese women-played roles spanning one century, starting with the 1922 film *The Toll of The Sea* to the 2022 film *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, to analyze how the portrayals have transformed. The investigation eventually comes to the conclusion, that while the portrayals of Chinese women in Hollywood initially resulted from Western misconceptions and oversexualization of the East, these prejudices were eventually mostly shed, leading to more nuanced and varied Chinese-woman played roles in Hollywood. Compared to the roles available for Chinese women in the 1920s, modern roles for Chinese women are significantly more diverse, with Chinese women now being portrayed as princesses, warriors, mothers, romantic leads, martial artists, and more.

Keywords: Chinese Women, Stereotypes, American Films, Film Industry, Hollywood

1. Introduction

In 2022, the comedy-action film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* became production studio A24's highest-grossing film of all time, grossing \$80 million at the box office. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* follows a Chinese-American mother Evelyn Wang, portrayed by Michelle Yeoh, as she travels through parallel universes to halt the destruction of the "multiverse". In 2018, the romantic-comedy *Crazy Rich Asians* became the highest-grossing romance film in a decade. The film follows a Chinese-American economics professor Rachel Chu, played by Constance Wu, as she travels to Singapore to meet her boyfriend's wealthy family [1-4].

In recent decades, Hollywood has made strides to be more inclusive with its castings and the stories it showcases. Now, Chinese women grace Hollywood screens as action stars, romantic leads, princesses and more. However, it has

taken decades to get to this place. Starting from the 1920s, the history of Chinese women's portrayals in American cinema is full of hyper-sexualization and problematic stereotypes. Upon modern investigation into the film portrayals of Chinese women in the 20th century, a majority of early Chinese women-played roles can be classified into two tropes: the "Dragon Lady" and the "Lotus Blossom".

2. The Dragon Lady

2.1. Origins of the Dragon Lady

The Dragon Lady is a stereotype of a woman typically of East Asian descent, who is overtly sexual, self-serving, cunning and malicious. Although most prolific in twentieth-century film, the Dragon Lady stereotype stems from decades of Yellow Peril and Anti-Chinese sentiment prior. The Page Act of 1875 prohibited the entry of women of

Chinese, Japanese or any “oriental” descent into the US, assuming most of them to be prostitutes. Asian women were often seen as promiscuous and prostitutes, as a result. Regarded as “lesser than” White women, Asian women were seen as sexual objects instead of wives. [5, 6]

However, the concept of Asian women as sexual beings goes back decades earlier. The Opium Wars opened trade routes to East Asia, mainly China and Japan—allowing for Western colonialists to experience “the orient”. There, colonialists engaged in prostitution with Asian women trapped into doing military sex work. Coming back to Europe, they shared their stories of Asian women, creating a sexualized and exotic image of Asian women in the Western world. This initial sexualization would later help spawn both the Dragon Lady stereotype and the later Lotus Blossom stereotype [7].

2.2. The Dragon Lady in Film

Wong Liu-tsong (1905-1961), widely known as Anna May Wong, is often regarded as the first Chinese-American film star. Throughout her decades-long career, Wong is most recognized for her roles that perpetuated the Dragon Lady or the Lotus Blossom stereotype. In the 1931 film *Daughter of the Dragon*, Wong portrays a performer that falls in love with an engaged White man, who was responsible for her father’s death. In the film, Wong danced suggestively in front of an audience, causing the White love interest to become infatuated with her. Due to anti-miscegenation laws which prevented interracial relationships (which were later repealed in 1943), on-screen interracial relationships were prohibited. In *Daughter of the Dragon*, the White love interest still falls for Wong’s character’s allure and the two nearly kiss. However, due to Wong’s character’s villainous nature, she still plots to kill her love interest and his partner and is almost successful. The story ends with Wong’s murder by the police, “leaving the white couple to live happily ever after”. The film’s poster also reinforces the malevolent stereotype: Wang is depicted as a large, angry floating green head glowering at the white couple, who cower in fear under her gaze. *Daughter of the Dragon* was one of the first films to establish the Dragon Lady stereotype; reinforcing the idea of “evil orientalism” and perpetuating that Chinese woman were purely objects of sexual desire, not “worthy” to be wives [6, 8-10].

The rest of Wong’s filmography is full of Dragon Lady roles. In the silent film *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924), Wong plays a deceitful Mongol slave. In *The Shanghai Express* (1931), Wong is a prostitute on a train who stabs one of the other passengers to death [9, 11, 12].

What separates the Dragon Lady from the Femme Fatale archetype is the Dragon Lady’s emphasis on her “exoticness”. Dragon Lady characters typically wear costumes that display their Asian heritage. In *Daughter of the Dragon*, Wong wears an ornate, larger-than-life oriental-style headdress and a sparkly Chinese-style gown. In *The Thief of Bagdad*, Wong wears a revealing two-piece with an oriental pattern on the front. Wearing undeniably “Chinese” outfits while scheming and committing wrongdoings inherently links “Asian-ness” to evil [10].

Wong’s success as an actress undoubtedly paved the way

for future Chinese actresses to find success in Hollywood. However, the endurance of the Dragon Lady stereotype signified that many changes in terms of inclusivity still had to be made. As Graham Russel Gao Hodges writes in *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman’s Daughter to Hollywood Legend*, “from a Chinese perspective, Anna May’s body, her dress and the ceiling decoration accentuate the power of the dragon as a symbol of China. From a Western viewpoint, the elements signify the dreaded Dragon Lady” [13].

Wong’s portrayal of the Dragon Lady stereotype was not generally approved by the Chinese public, with some of her films such as *The Shanghai Express* being banned in China. Chinese press outlets even referred to her films as a “disgrace” to China. However, on the matter, Wong said that she “didn’t get much choice” about the roles she got to play [10].

Despite being a vehicle for the stereotype— even being dubbed “the screen’s foremost Oriental villainess” by Time magazine— Wong, herself, disapproved of how it reflected on Chinese women. In a 1933 magazine interview, Wong said “Why is it that the screen Chinese is nearly always the villain of the piece, and so cruel a villain—murderous, treacherous, a snake in the grass. We are not like that.” [14].

3. The Lotus Blossom

3.1. Origins of the Lotus Blossom

The Lotus Blossom (also referred to as the China doll, Butterfly or Geisha Girl) is similar to the Dragon Lady in that they are both sexual in nature. However, unlike the Dragon Lady, the Lotus Blossom is submissive, docile, and meant to be “dominated” or “saved” by White men. Also like the Dragon Lady, the Lotus Blossom stems from the overt-sexualizing of Asian Women and the notion that they are mostly prostitutes, emphasized by the Page Act of 1875. However, although the Lotus Blossom is more sought after, rather than feared like the Dragon Lady, Lotus Blossoms still aren’t seen as long-term wives, as they are often still left for White women by their White suitors [5].

The Lotus Blossom stereotype began to gain traction in Hollywood, post-World War II, as more men brought Asian wives back to the US. This process was allowed by the War Brides Acts of 1945 and 1946, which allowed US servicemen who married women while stationed abroad to bring them back home “on a non-quota basis and without regard to racial exclusion laws”. As film scholar Celine Parreñas Shimizu says, “after US-led wars in Asian countries is when the trope of the hypersexual but docile Asian woman really took hold in America”. In most films that feature Lotus Blossoms, the heroine is a prostitute who falls in love with a foreign White man (often times a military man) [15, 16].

3.2. The Lotus Blossom in Film

Before finding fame by portraying the Dragon Lady, Anna May Wong’s first film was the silent film *The Toll of the Sea* (1922). *The Toll of the Sea* is an adaptation of the Opera Madame Butterfly but is instead set in China instead of Japan.

In the film, Wong plays the quite literally named Lotus Flower who falls in love with a White American seaman, Allen Carver. The two marry and he promises to bring Lotus with him when he returns to the States. However, he does not fulfill his promise and leaves alone, unaware that Lotus was pregnant with his child. Carver returns to China with his American wife, leaving Lotus devastated. Lotus asks the couple to bring her son back to the states with them and the film ends with the implication that Lotus drowned herself. *The Toll of the Sea* contributes to the image that Asian women are helpless without their white savior men [17].

In *China Doll* (1958), an American Pilot Cliff Brandon, who is stationed in China during World War II, purchases a girl, Shu-Jen, from her father. Shu-Jen becomes pregnant and the two marry. Brandon's purchasing of Shu-Jen helped her family's finances as Shu-Jen's family farm was taken by Japanese Troops [9, 18].

Nancy Kwon (1939-) was the next Chinese-American actress to rise to popularity after Anna May Wong. She starred as Suzie Wong, a Chinese prostitute in Hong Kong in the 1960 film *The World of Suzie Wong*. In the film, Suzie Wong is illiterate and orphaned and is a prostitute at a hotel out of necessity. She and American artist Robert Lomax fall in love and marry; rescuing her from prostitution. As suggested by the film, part of the attraction to the Lotus Blossom is her "exoticness". When Suzie Wong wears a Western-style dress instead of the traditional Cheongsam dresses she usually wears, Lomax is appalled and tells her she "looks like a cheap European streetwalker". In the film, the submissiveness of the Lotus Blossom to her White love interest is emphasized. Wong is happy to stay with Lomax "for as long as he wants her around"; insinuating she is satisfied with fulfilling whatever he wants first [9, 10, 19, 20].

Although the Lotus Blossom was portrayed in a more flattering light than the Dragon Lady, both of them suffer from what all stereotypes do: one-dimensionality. The Dragon Lady is portrayed as nothing more than a ruthless, hypersexual villain, a vehicle for people to project their Yellow Peril onto. Whereas the Lotus Blossom is not so much her individual person as an opportunity for their White love interest to be a "savior" and to experience an "exotic" new woman.

4. Dismantling Stereotypes

While Anna May Wong is most recognized for her Dragon Lady and Lotus Blossom roles, she eventually played less stereotype-conforming roles later on in her career. In the 1942 film *Lady from Chungking*, Wong plays Kwan Mei, a leader of an uprising against the Japanese occupation of China. In the film, Kwan Mei is portrayed as a strong fighter against the Japanese—a welcomed portrayal as the US was at war against Japan at the time [9, 21].

However, it wasn't until the 1990's that more nuanced portrayals of Chinese women would grace movie theater screens across the US.

4.1. *The Joy Luck Club* (1993)

The 1993 film *The Joy Luck Club*, based on a novel by the same name, was the second film to have a primarily Asian-American cast, 30 years after *Flower Drum Song* (1961), and the first American film to have a mostly Asian-American female cast. *The Joy Luck Club* strays away from past stereotypes and works to tell the stories of nuanced Chinese-American women. The film centers on a group of Chinese-American mothers, who had lived through pre-revolutionary China, and their daughters, all now living in San Francisco. When focusing on each mother-daughter duo, the film showcases the struggles endured by and the relationship between Chinese-American women from different generations as they deal with the collision between Chinese and American cultures [22, 23].

The mothers meet often to play Mahjong, a Chinese tile game, and tell stories about their lives. Mother Lindo Jong escapes an abusive arranged marriage in China and then later grapples with her daughter Waverly's interracial relationship in the States. Ying Ying St. Clair helps her daughter Lena come to terms with her unhappiness in her relationship, after experiencing her own abusive relationship and trauma back in China. Rose Hsu feels as if she has lost her identity and has become submissive to appeal to her White husband, who she feels is unfaithful. Rose's mother An-Mei convinces Rose to confront her problems with her husband by telling her the story of her own mother's abusive relationship and eventual suicide back in China. The final mother-daughter duo Suyuan and June Woo maintain a tense relationship as June feels that she can't live up to her mother's high expectations. Following Suyuan's death, June learns of her past living in China amidst Japanese occupation during World War II and her half-sisters Suyuan had to abandon due to the war. The film ends with June traveling to China to relay the news of their mother's death [22].

The Joy Luck Club was a landmark for Asian-American, specifically Chinese-American women, representation in American film. Not only were the superficial Dragon Lady and Lotus Blossom left behind, but the entire film focused solely, instead, on the stories of eight complex and resilient Chinese-American women. *The Joy Luck Club* women aren't hypersexualized and treated like the objects of White men's desires—they are real people who deal with real problems. *The Joy Luck Club* marks a transition into portraying Chinese women as multi-faceted and strong individuals.

4.2. *Mulan* (1998)

In 1998, Disney released their 8th animated Disney princess film, *Mulan*—the first East Asian and the first (and only) Chinese Disney princess. Although in the princess franchise, Mulan is not technically a princess as she is not born into a royal family or ends up marrying into royalty in the original film. Based on a Chinese legend, Mulan, voiced by Ming-Na Wen (who also starred as June Woo in *The Joy Luck Club*), pretends to be a man and takes her ill father's place in the Chinese military draft during the Han dynasty. Mulan trains alongside the other male warriors and eventually wards off an

invasion by the nomadic people group, the Huns [24].

Unlike princess movies of the past, such as *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) where the princess is saved thanks to her courageous prince, *Mulan* showcases a fiercely independent woman who requires no “saving” from her Prince. Instead, Mulan is (after training) seen as an equal warrior to her male colleagues and is capable of making strategic decisions in the war that even the more experienced male warriors couldn’t think of. Mulan’s portrayal is a stark contrast to Lotus Blossom characters, as she is stripped of her traditional femininity in the film and is seen as strong and agile, rather than submissive. Additionally, Mulan is given a Chinese love interest rather than a White love interest, moving past the cliched White savior-Asian Girl complex [24-26].

5. Twenty-First-Century Chinese Women in Film

5.1. Pervasiveness of Stereotypes

Some twenty-first films still adhere to the old one-dimensional Dragon Lady and Lotus Blossom stereotypes. For example, in the 2001 Jackie Chan film *Rush Hour 2*, both the Dragon Lady and the Lotus Blossom stereotypes were prevalent. One of the antagonists of the film is Hu Li, a cunning villain with only three lines in English. Moreover, in one scene at a massage parlor, one of the protagonists, portrayed by Chris Tucker, is met with a group of twenty-twenty Chinese women wearing revealing bikinis staring at him seductively. The massage parlor owner asks him if he’s ever had a “massage” from a Chinese girl before, he replies and says “No, but I heard it was the bomb”. The massage parlor owner tells him to pick any girl he wants and then he quickly picks the Chinese girl pushing up her breasts with her hands at him. This plays into the image of Chinese women being sexual objects to please foreign men, similar to the Lotus Blossom stereotype [27].

However, films that overtly play into these stereotypes are rare today. As American culture became more accepting of Chinese and Asian women in general, the Anti-Chinese sentiment that made stereotypes socially acceptable has diminished. A majority of modern films, especially those with a Chinese woman as the lead, aim to tell new stories that do not try to stereotype.

5.2. *Saving Face* (2004)

The 2004 film *Saving Face* focuses on Dr. Wilhelmina “Wil” Pang, portrayed by Michelle Krusiec, a successful Chinese-American surgeon in New York. Pang is a lesbian and is hiding the fact from her mother, who is secretly pregnant out of wedlock—a huge taboo in traditional Chinese culture. The film focuses on the relationship between the two and Pang’s relationship with her girlfriend, Vivian Shing, as Pang’s mother is forced to live with her after her pregnancy was found out. *Saving Face* discusses how traditional cultural values and the heteronormativity of the Chinese community can restrict the freedom of women. Pang’s attraction to women subverts the past

view of Chinese women as objects for men’s sexual pleasure. Pang’s existence not only contrasts stereotypes, but she even challenges them directly in the film. Pang visits a video store to buy pornography featuring Asian women and sees that the Asian women mostly portray Lotus Blossoms and Dragon Ladies, this leads her to question and critique the stereotypes. Pang is portrayed as strong and brave for being persistent in her pursuit of happiness as an ethnic minority in the already LGBTQ community. *Saving Face* has become a classic as it was one of the first to depict a lesbian Chinese woman, after decades of solely heterosexual Chinese women on film [28].

5.3. *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018)

The 2018 romantic-comedy *Crazy Rich Asians* focuses on protagonist Rachel Chu as she travels with her boyfriend Nick to meet his obscenely wealthy family in Singapore. The film was the first primarily Asian casted film since *The Joy Luck Club* (1993). *Crazy Rich Asians’* portrayal of Rachel demonstrates that Chinese women can be present in storylines involving romance without being overtly sexualized. Rachel is portrayed as a real, dimensional person instead of a sexual object or solely a girlfriend—she is more than her relationship with her love interest. The film showcases Rachel as a beloved and brilliant Economics professor first, before then delving into her relationship with her boyfriend—establishing that she is her own individual person with her own talent and intellect before she is a romantic partner. Rachel is not objectified and is seen wearing regular clothes such as jeans and t-shirts. She is not seen intentionally trying to seduce her love interest like Dragon Ladies and Lotus Blossoms do. Furthermore, Rachel being unaware of her love interest’s extreme wealth proves that her love is genuine and does not have “gold-digging” intentions, a contrast to the self-serving Dragon Lady. Rachel’s love interest being an Asian Singaporean also subverts the popular Asian girl-White guy stereotype. *Crazy Rich Asians* establishes the fact that Chinese women can successfully be romantic-comedy stars, a title typically held by White women, and also exist in a romantic capacity without being treated like sexual objects [4].

5.4. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022)

The 2022 comedy-action film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* provides a unique portrayal of the “badass” Chinese woman. Past films, such as *Mulan* (1998), have already portrayed Chinese women as powerful fighters and action stars. Actress Lucy Liu (1968-) is well-known for playing “badass” fighter characters in her films like *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (2003) and *Charlie’s Angels* (2000). In *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, the protagonist of the film is Evelyn Quan Wang, portrayed by Michelle Yeoh, a middle-aged mother and laundromat owner who is tasked with stopping the destruction of the “multiverse”. Evelyn has to travel throughout the different universes and attack enemies in hand-to-hand combat. The film is unique in its portrayal of the Chinese female action star in that its protagonist is much older than its counterparts. Other Asian action-star women fit the mold of what a “badass” fighter

woman is expected to be: they're young, they're physically fit and they have jobs that require them to train and fight, as military women, assassins or private detectives. However, Evelyn Wang is nothing like them— she's a regular suburban Chinese-American mother. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* having a “normal”, unremarkable character be the protagonist and be responsible for “saving the day” asserts that regular Chinese women, not just trained fighters and assassins, can be badass too. [2, 29, 30].

6. Conclusion

The portrayal of Chinese Women in American films has progressed a lot in the past century— from the Dragon Lady stereotype fueled by Anti-Asian sentiment to the Lotus Flower stereotype stemming from the Western view of Asian women as sexual objects and to the diverse modern-day portrayals of Chinese women in American film. More than ever before, Chinese and Chinese-American actresses have a broad range of roles they can portray that highlight the different capabilities of the Chinese woman— she can love, she can fight and she can inspire. If the film industry continues on the path it's on, in the next few decades more films will showcase multidimensional Chinese women of different backgrounds and fully pull the plug on the surface-level stereotypes.

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