

American Fantasies of China and the Chinese: Constructing China and Its People in Hollywood Films to 1949

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I, Xueyan Sun, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

This thesis analyses the characteristics of and influences upon constructions of China and the people of China in American feature films from c. 1910 until after the end of World War II.

Chapter 1 addresses the derogatory representations of China and the Chinese created in American popular culture (especially print media) against a backcloth from the 1870s of increasingly vehement anti-Chinese sentiment. During the late nineteenth century, similar unfavourable images of Chinese people also emerged in theatrical productions. Chapter 2 analyses the filmic representations of China and the Chinese produced in the 1910s and 1920s and their connections with traditional media (both print and theatrical), also exploring the historical context within which these early films were produced.

Chapters 3 and 4 investigate Hollywood's China/Chinese constructions in the 1930s, a period during which the movie industry itself experienced major changes, including the beginning of effective self-regulation and financial difficulties brought by the Great Depression. Chapter 3 analyses the growing 1930s attention to China as a cinematic subject, portraying it as an exciting locale and its people as exotic beings (e.g. Manchurians, warlords). Chapter 4, however, argues that, despite the efforts of the Production Code Administration and the active role played by Chinese diplomats in attempting to influence Hollywood's representation of their country and people, traditional unfavourable images remained largely constant until World War II.

Chapter 5 analyses wartime propaganda films, which changed and subverted these unfavourable constructions of the Chinese. The Federal government began to intervene in the film industry after the creation of the Office of War Information in 1942, and many sympathetic – if unrealistic – portrayals of China on screen become prevalent. This chapter reviews these changing constructions yet concludes that, though seemingly more positive in

their representations of China, they were in reality still influenced by earlier prejudices and stereotypes.

Impact Statement

This thesis studies the cultural, political, and historical factors that have shaped the representations of China and its people in American popular culture (folk songs, poems, caricatures, and theatrical works) in the late nineteenth century and the subsequent cinematic representations of them from the 1910s to 1949. Inside academia, the scholarship of this thesis and the method used to conduct the research – a combined investigation into film itself, its historical background, and relevant reception materials, publicity materials, and industrial and governmental regulatory materials (in particular, the archives of the Production Code Administration and Office of War Information) – will make contributions in a range of disciplines including American and Chinese history, Film Studies, and American Studies. The thesis has also laid a foundation for future research. This could include, for example, evolving cinematic representations of China and Chinese people in Hollywood films during the Cold War years and how these were received by American critics and the public.

The academic impact of the thesis would include making contributions in scholarly journals (including the fields of American Studies, American history, and Film Studies) and as a published monograph (potentially in both English and Chinese). The academic impact could also emerge through educational and academic activities. For example, the contents of the thesis could be used as course materials, presented at conferences, and organised into a seminar series.

The benefits outside academia would occur in terms of producing greater cultural understanding, especially shedding light on the roots of western perceptions of Chinese people and China as a country. It is hoped that, with the contributions of this thesis and future scholarship inspired by it, cultural barriers between the West and China in various fields (especially media, education, commercial activities, and policy-making) may be

incrementally improved. Since American cultural constructions of Chinese people mirror those of many other western countries with increasing Chinese populations, for example, the United Kingdom, it might be useful and of interest to both native-born westerners and Chinese communities (for instance, Chinese-American Associations and the British-born Chinese community) in these countries to learn about the social and cultural origin of prejudice toward the Chinese population in the West. This thesis may help explain to non-academic audiences how certain stereotypes of the Chinese that may still be seen today on TV, film, and social media were created and developed in American popular culture. It is believed that understanding the Chinese both as foreign nationals and as a minority community, as well as recognising the ways in which they have often been misunderstood, will benefit not only the lives of the Chinese population in western societies, but also these countries' own relationships with China in terms of cultural communications, commercial activities and, perhaps, political interactions.

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Introduction

Historian Robert A. Rosenstone argues that “the visual media are a legitimate way of doing history—of representing, interpreting, thinking about, and making meaning from the traces of the past.”¹ Films reflect their makers’ perspectives at the specific time they were produced and often have a tendency to reinforce existing popular stereotypes and prejudices. Consequently, Hollywood films are valuable resources when studying American cultural constructions of China and its people, being based on and influenced by American fantasies about the Far East and the changing US-China relationship during different eras. This thesis will analyse American cultural constructions of China and its people in the nineteenth century and the subsequent cinematic representations of them from the 1910s to 1945. Although American attitudes towards Chinese immigrants in the US, as will be discussed, played an important part in influencing the ways in which Chinese characters were represented on screen, the focus in this thesis is on China itself and its inhabitants.

During the period covered by this thesis, the cinematic images of China and Chinese people evolved significantly, accommodating social changes, Hollywood’s own industrial transformation, and regulations imposed by self-censorship and regulatory agencies, such as the Production Code Administration (PCA) established in 1934 and the Office of War Information (OWI) introduced in 1942. It will be argued here that, in spite of superficial changes and improvements Hollywood made in presenting Chinese people on American movie screens, the image of them remained nearly consistently negative and unsympathetic until the propaganda pictures produced during the Second World War foregrounded a “New China” and a modern generation of young Chinese. This “favourable” image of the United

¹ Robert A. Rosenstone, *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 3.

States' Chinese allies during the war years, however, was also an unconvincing and problematic representation based on illusory and inflated images of Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist government. The wartime image of the Chinese as heroic allies would not survive 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party announced the foundation of the People's Republic of China.

Chapters one and two of the thesis cover American cultural constructions of the Chinese in the late nineteenth century and the relationship between these constructions and the American film industry's representations of China and its people onscreen in the first three decades of the twentieth century. The first chapter demonstrates how the Chinese were represented in American popular culture – especially in folk songs, cartoons, poetry, literature, and stage plays – during the late nineteenth century. These portrayals, it is argued, were much influenced by US foreign policy toward China and the history of Chinese immigration in the United States at the time. The Burlingame Treaty ratified by the US Senate in 1868 guaranteed free Chinese emigration to the United States and pledged to protect Chinese immigrants' legal rights in the US. The adoption of the treaty encouraged a major growth in Chinese immigration to the West Coast. Consequently, when an economic depression began in 1873, cheap imported Chinese labour became the principal scapegoat for the increasing number of unemployed white workers in the Pacific region. Against the backcloth of this tide of anti-Chinese sentiment, many derogatory representations of China and the Chinese appeared in American print media as well as in folk songs and nursery rhymes. The increasingly vehement resentment of the Chinese on the part of members of the white working class was an important factor in the passage of the Federal Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882.²

² Delber L. McKee, *Chinese Exclusion versus the Open Door Policy, 1900-1906: Clashes over China policy in the Roosevelt Era* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1977), p. 24.

By the 1890s, a series of unfavourable images of the Chinese on stage had been presented by several playwrights, including Mark Twain and Bret Harte. These cultural constructions of Chinese people often became the archetypes for Chinese characters in American films in the early years of the twentieth century. In chapter two, the connections between the images of Chinese people developed in the late nineteenth century and the representations of them in early Hollywood films will be analysed in a number of major motion pictures, including *Forbidden City* (1918), *Broken Blossoms* (1919), *Shadows* (1922), and *Mr. Wu* (1927). It will be argued that American films about China were never just “entertainment”—they were, and would continue to be, an extension of many Americans’ perceptions and fantasies of the Chinese as the “other.”

Chapters three and four analyse the interplay between Hollywood’s efforts at self-regulation and representations of the Chinese people during the 1930s. By the 1930s, Hollywood itself was going through drastic changes—the coming of sound from 1927, the effects of the Great Depression after 1929, and the advent of the Production Code (guidance for film studios and producers to follow) in 1930. The period between 1930 and 1934, which would later come to be viewed as “Pre-Code” Hollywood, witnessed some of the most fantastic and bold depictions of China and its people in the history of American cinema.³ These films include, *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932), *Shanghai Express* (1932), and *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933). In 1934, the Production Code Administration (PCA) was established by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) to tighten the process of self-regulation.

In the meantime, the Chinese Nationalist Government had realised the increasing global influence of Hollywood and decided to try to persuade the American movie industry to

³ Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

improve its portrayals of Chinese people in film in order to better China's national image in the world. The Chinese government created the National Board of Film Censors (NBFC) in 1931, which later reorganised into the Central Motion Picture Censorship Committee (CMPCC) in 1934 and lasted until 1938, for this very purpose and sent a Chinese consul, initially Yi-Seng Kiang and later T. K. Chang, to Los Angeles to try to influence Hollywood studios and the PCA. Based on the voluminous files of the PCA and the correspondence between the agency, studios and Chinese consuls, it is argued in chapter four that, although both the PCA and studios often placated the Chinese consuls under diplomatic pressure, there were still minimal changes actually made to the derogatory representations of Chinese people in Hollywood films. Analysis of films, indeed, suggests that – in spite of the active role the Chinese consuls played – fantasised images of China remained very much the same throughout the 1930s until 1941. The films analysed to support this argument include *The Cat's Paw* (1934), *Lost Horizon* (1937), *The Good Earth* (1937), and *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941). It was not until the United States' official involvement in the Second World War that the filmic representations of the Chinese in American cinema began seriously to change.

Chapter five deals with the efforts of the Federal Government during World War II to influence the ways in which a "New China" was represented in Hollywood films. After Japan's attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 and the US's subsequent entry into the war, President Franklin D. Roosevelt merged several propaganda agencies with overlapping functions to create the Office of War Information (OWI). The creation of the OWI on 13 June 1942 represented a determined effort on the part of the Federal government to mobilise the mass media behind the war effort. The OWI also began to pressure the film industry and used commercial film as a strategic tool to "properly" present the US's allies and enemies to American citizens. Under pressure from the OWI, Hollywood significantly reconstructed the images of China and the Chinese in films.

Many idealised but problematic Chinese characters were created during this period. For example, many wartime films apotheosise the Chinese by effectively “Americanising” them while, at the same time, criminalising the Japanese (though confusingly often casting Chinese actors to play them). According to Robert Burgoyne, many American films define and create social identities by breaking them down into “relations of opposition and antagonism” while “molding ... ethnic and racial identity as the positive and organic traits that supposedly distinguish one group from another.”⁴ This wartime switch between racial affinity and racial difference in representing the Chinese and Japanese on film underlines the subjective nature of American propaganda. The so-claimed affection for Chinese people demonstrated in wartime American films was unreliable and largely exaggerated, being at heart a fiction developed merely for wartime needs. Based on the OWI’s script reviews and film analyses located in the US National Archives, chapter five analyses how the OWI introduced propaganda information into commercial Hollywood films. It also explores the direct influence of the US-China alliance in shaping representations of China and the Chinese in World War II American pictures. For example, correspondence between the China Defense Supplies organisation (chaired by T. V. Soong, brother-in-law of the head of China’s Nationalist government, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek), Chinese consul Chang, the OWI, and Hollywood studios reveals the industry’s very different attitude towards Chinese officials in comparison to what it had been in the 1930s. Images of the “New China” and modern young Chinese were subsequently created under the influence of a joint effort by these different parties. This over-idealised image of China, of course, did not survive 1949, when the relationship between the US and China quickly turned from being allies to becoming enemies.

⁴ Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at US History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 2.

Existing Historiography

This thesis would not exist without other scholars' contributions to the field. The secondary literature that provides a background to this thesis engages predominantly with three areas—the historiography of US-China relations, the history of Hollywood itself as an industry, and the history of representing China and the Chinese in American popular culture. Gordon H. Chang's *Fateful Ties: A History of America's Preoccupation with China* (2015) provides a good overview of the changing relationship of the United States and China from their first contact in the eighteenth century to the twenty-first century.⁵ Chang's book explores the two countries' connections in various fields, including political interactions, missionary activities, cultural exchanges, and trade relations. His work, covering a long chronological period, captures many aspects involved in the US-China relationship. It also references some famous films about China, for example *The Good Earth* (1937) and *Dragon Seed* (1944). Chang does not, however, analyse movies in relation to the history of American cultural constructions of China and its people as will be done in this thesis. Michael Schaller's *The United States and China: Into the Twenty-First Century* (2002) differs from Chang's work, having a stronger focus on the political relations between the two governments.⁶ This thesis has benefitted in particular from Schaller's analysis of the US Government's differing responses to the Chinese Nationalist government and the Chinese Communist party during the Chinese Civil War/World War II period. Schaller also draws attention to the historical reasons for the Roosevelt Administration's comparative neglect of the fast-expanding power of the Chinese Communists.

⁵ Gordon H. Chang, *Fateful Ties: A History of America's Preoccupation with China* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2015).

⁶ Michael Schaller, *The United States and China: Into the Twenty-first century* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

John King Fairbank's *The United States and China* is a major work in the field of US-China relations.⁷ First published in 1948, it has been updated three times, with the latest edition in 1983. The book provides an overview of Chinese modern history and America's China policies. It is an invaluable reference work, with an exhaustive bibliography, providing further reading on varied aspects of US-China relations. In Part I "The Old Order" and Part II "The Revolutionary Process" (both of which are the most relevant to this thesis), Fairbank analyses the Confucian philosophical system in relation to China's political traditions, the Manchurian Empire's failure as an inept government and the western imperialistic expansion in China in the late Qing dynasty (especially from the mid-nineteenth century to 1912), the series of reforms and revolutions that took place in China in this period, and the rise of both the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, or KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the enduring struggle between the two. The thematic/chronological organisation of the book offers an exploration of China's history and traditions from the perspective of an American historian. *The United States and China* is irreplaceable not only for its academic contribution and influence on the field but also in the sense that it reflects, to some extent, the popular view among western scholars of China and US-China relations during the period 1948-1983. Other useful works providing backcloth to the US-China relationship include Warren I. Cohen's *America's Response to China: A History of Sino-American Relations*, first published in 1971 and re-issued several times; Robert G. Sutter's *US-China Relations: Perilous Past, Uncertain Present* (2018); and Dong Wang's *The United States and China: A History from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (2013).⁸

⁷ John King Fairbank, *The United States and China* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 4th ed., 1983).

⁸ Warren I. Cohen, *America's Response to China: A History of Sino-American Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, fifth edition 2010, first pub. 1971); Robert G. Sutter, *US-China Relations: Perilous Past, Uncertain Present* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018); Dong Wang, *The United States and China: A History from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013).

A number of other works have provided useful perspective on the US-China relationship in specific eras. Michael H. Hunt's *The Making of a Special Relationship: the United States and China to 1914* (1983) and Delber L. McKee's *Chinese Exclusion versus the Open Door Policy, 1900-1906: Clashes over China Policy in the Roosevelt Era* (1977), for example, analyse the US's China policies from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1910s, offering detailed interpretations of the historical context and the overall social environment in the US underpinning the making of both the exclusion acts and the "Open Door" Policy.⁹

During the period when the US government was tightening immigration policies to prevent Chinese people from entering the United States (especially from the enactment of the first exclusion law in 1882 until the passage of the Asian Exclusion Act in 1924, which barred all Asian immigrants from entry), very negative images of Chinese labourers began to emerge in American popular culture linked to the strong anti-Chinese sentiment expressed in some quarters of American society. Ronald Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (1998) explores a series of personal experiences and recollections of Asian Americans both before and during the exclusion period, providing background for the discussion in this thesis of early cultural constructions of the Chinese, especially Chinese men, in American caricatures, songs, poetry, advertisements and stage plays.¹⁰

The histories of US-China foreign relations and American immigration policies toward the Chinese are crucial to this thesis. It is argued in this work that American racism and representations of the Chinese are significantly influenced by the changing political relations between the two countries, during a time when China itself was also experiencing tremendous transformations. This thesis fills the gaps between historical studies of US-China

⁹ Michael H. Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship: the United States and China to 1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); McKee, *Chinese Exclusion versus the Open Door Policy, 1900-1906*

¹⁰ Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998).

relations and film studies of the representations of China and the Chinese in American cinema, providing analysis of and investigation into how the two areas of studies interrelate and influence each other. In *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882* (1999), John Kuo Wei Tchen demonstrates how the concept of “Orientalism” evolved and helped to construct a Chinese national identity in American culture.¹¹ His discussion of political Orientalism focuses on a series of cartoonists’ works by, for example, Thomas Nast and Joseph Keppler. Tchen’s study acted as an inspiration for this study’s investigation into broader representations of China and the Chinese people in various American art forms in the era before the emergence of motion pictures. The cartoons and stage plays referenced in Tchen’s work are important here because some of them would later become the cultural archetypes to be used by early Hollywood film-makers in making movies about China. An important aspect of the thesis that follows is the analysis of how such archetypes developed in “silent era” American films.

While the images of China and the Chinese people in American media were constructed by a small cultural and intellectual elite, the American public’s reception of these images played a crucial part in passing on the prejudices and stereotypes they embodied into broad sectors of American life. Harold Isaacs’s *Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India* (1980) is one of the pioneering works investigating Americans’ popular perceptions of China and the Chinese, together with India and the Indians.¹² The author was a journalist and political/social scientist who had lived in China for several years in the early 1930s and developed a strong affection for the country. During his stay in China, Isaacs founded an English-language weekly publication titled *The China Forum*, which irritated the

¹¹ John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

¹² Harold R. Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India* (London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis, 1980).

Chinese Nationalist government for its constant criticism of Chiang Kai-shek's policies and political practices. Isaacs was subsequently blacklisted by the Kuomintang after the Second World War. *Scratches on Our Minds* first appeared in 1958 and was re-edited and republished in 1972 and 1980. By interviewing 181 panellists from various background, Isaacs aimed to demonstrate Americans' subjective and stereotypical views of China and India and their peoples.¹³ Isaacs's observations on the two contrasting images of the Chinese that prevailed in the United States – highly-intelligent, civilised and dignified Chinese versus barbaric, unfathomable and faceless yellow hordes – anticipated to some degree the discussion in this thesis about major stereotypes of the Chinese in American culture. Isaacs contended in his book, by reference to selected interviews, that more interactions with Chinese people and greater understanding of Chinese culture would reduce imaginative and stereotypical preconceptions of Chinese people and encourage Americans to a significant degree to form more favourable views of China.

T. Christopher Jespersen's *American Images of China, 1931-1949* (1996) explores America's construction of China from the beginnings of Japan's invasion of the country to the foundation of the People's Republic of China.¹⁴ The author focuses on non-governmental forces that influenced US-China relations. Jespersen analyses several key figures, for example, the American magazine tycoon and missionary child Henry Luce, who personally admired Generalissimo Chiang and his government, ensuring that they would have favourable coverage in *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune* (publications he owned) throughout the 1930s

¹³ Andrew J. Rotter, "In Retrospect: Harold R. Isaacs's *Scratches on Our Minds*," *Reviews in American History*, vol. 24, no.1 (March 1996), 177-88. Rotter points out that a modern pollster would disagree with Isaacs's selection of the sample: the majority of his subjects were friends and acquaintances and their occupations (mainly academics, media workers, government/ex-government officers, and missionaries) hardly represent a cross-section of American society. Ibid.

¹⁴ T. Christopher Jespersen, *American Images of China, 1931-1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

and 40s. Luce also foregrounded American-university-educated Madame Chiang, whose tour of the United States in 1943 was a successful expression of soft power, advancing the cause of her husband and his government in America. Jespersen also analyses the impacts of the United China Relief (UCR), an umbrella organisation consolidating several humanitarian agencies, in shaping American images of China as a worthy ally during the Second World War. This thesis has particularly benefited from *American Images of China*'s investigation of the UCR and its pro-China materials produced for fund-raising purposes during wartime. Tchen and Jespersen's works demonstrate American non-filmic cultural constructions of China and the Chinese people in different eras against different historical backgrounds. In spite of their divergent focuses, the two studies both suggest that the image of China in American culture was largely based on Americans' assumptions about themselves and their imaginative constructions of China and Chinese culture. This thesis builds on their investigations of other forms of American popular culture and explores how racism, xenophobia, naivete, arrogance, paternalism and even awe encouraged American fantasies of China in the filmic realm. Issacs, on the other hand, provides an interesting discussion of the two major contrasting stereotypes – Marco Polo and Genghis Khan – Americans have had about China. This thesis repeatedly engages with the two stereotypes and showcases how they were reflected in American cinema against various historical backdrops. The industrial history of Hollywood is also crucial to this thesis. During the 1910s, having consolidated its domestic market by effectively driving out European films, Hollywood began to penetrate – and soon to dominate – the global marketplace for movies.¹⁵ John Trumbour's *Selling Hollywood to the World: U.S. and European Struggles for Mastery of the Global Film*

¹⁵ On the successful American efforts to exclude foreign (especially French) competition from its own markets, see Richard Abel, *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: California University Press, 1999) and Abel, *Americanizing the Movies and Movie-Mad Audiences, 1910-1914* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: California University Press, 2006).

Industry, 1920-1950 (2007) and Ruth Vasey's *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939* (1997) cover Hollywood's ambitious expansion, business strategies, and, more importantly for the dissertation that follows, its self-regulatory agency—the Production Code Administration which, by enforcing the Production Code of 1930 (the industry's moral guidelines) more tightly, directly influenced how American films' represented race, gender, sexuality, foreign nations, and a range of other issues.¹⁶ A major section of this thesis will be devoted to an analysis of the PCA's role after its foundation in 1934 in shaping the representations of the Chinese in American films, together with an evaluation of the effectiveness of the Chinese Nationalist government's own active involvement in Hollywood aiming at influencing cinematic representation of China.

For the history of Hollywood's self-regulation and the PCA, the present author consulted three books by film historian Thomas Doherty. *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934* (1999) introduces the industrial history of Hollywood during 1930-34, the period before the PCA was founded and the Production Code began to be enforced by Joseph I. Breen's office.¹⁷ The main body of the book is devoted to the films produced and released during Pre-Code Hollywood. The section named "East Mates West" (analysing racial themes in films *The Mask of Fu Manchu* and *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*) provided new perspectives into exploring Hollywood's presentations of miscegenation between the Chinese and whites. Professor Doherty's two other books – *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration* (2007) and *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (1993) –

¹⁶ John Trumbour, *Selling Hollywood to the World: U.S. and European Struggles for Mastery of the Global Film Industry, 1920-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).

¹⁷ Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

covering the role of Joseph I. Breen in relation to the Production Code Administration and Hollywood itself during the war years – provided much helpful background for the relevant chapters in this thesis.¹⁸

Trumpbour and Vasey's works provided ample information about Hollywood's ambition in the global market in the first half of the twentieth century and the influence of the MPPDA on Hollywood's international expansion. In explaining Hollywood's diplomatic strategies to accommodate the foreign market, Vasey engages in detail with materials from the MPPDA and studios' archives, including some examples of the PCA and studios' interactions with the Chinese consul T. K. Chang. This thesis benefits greatly from the industrial history of Hollywood these two works provide, and they have influenced my analysis of the American film industry's particular interest in the "China market", as well as of China's own efforts made in the 1930s to influence Hollywood's representation of Chinese people to the world. Doherty's works, on the other hand, thoroughly investigate Hollywood's self-regulation from 1930 to the war years, making it possible for this thesis to explore more specifically how the PCA shaped Hollywood's construction of China and the Chinese in American cinema. All of these scholars' works on both US-China relations and Hollywood industrial history paved the way for this thesis, enabling it to make linkages between history, politics and culture, and making sense of how and why China and the Chinese people appeared in American films in certain ways over an extended period of time.

There already exists some film scholarship on how China and its people have been portrayed in American movies. Jeffrey Richards's *China and the Chinese in Popular Film: From Fu Manchu to Charlie Chan* (2017), for example, centres on the two most famous

¹⁸ Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

Chinese fictional characters developed by American film producers: the insidious Dr. Fu Manchu – the ultimate “yellow peril” reincarnation – and the benevolent Chinese-American detective, Charlie Chan.¹⁹ Richards’ book demonstrates in detail the cultural significance of the two characters and the reasons why they were depicted in the ways they were. The analysis of the character Fu Manchu is the major focus of the book, and it explores the character on the basis of both its literary portrayals and filmic representations. *China and the Chinese in Popular Film* was very useful at the beginning of my research for its assistance in identifying a range of Hollywood productions with Chinese settings or focusing on Chinese characters. Naomi Greene’s *From Fu Manchu to Kung Fu Panda: Images of China in American Film* (2014) also investigates a series of American films and animations from the 1910s to the 2000s and demonstrates how the image of the Chinese changed over time.²⁰ The principal focus of the book is on “Chinese otherness” in American mainstream films as a reflection of the prejudices and stereotypes rooted in American society. The “otherness” and “selfness” binary in many American films, Greene argues, reveals how the nation envisions its own role in the world.

Gina Marchetti’s *Romance and the “Yellow Peril”: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (1993) analyses several major twentieth-century films and focuses on the racial and gender issues they display. Marchetti acutely points out both ostensible and latent problems posed by such depictions of Oriental characters (Chinese and Japanese specifically) in the films, all produced by white film-makers. Each chapter of her book analyses one or two films as case studies to examine white superiority and the patriarchal and bourgeois ideologies they reflect in relation to racial and gender identities

¹⁹ Jeffrey Richards, *China and the Chinese in Popular Film: from Fu Manchu to Charlie Chan* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

²⁰ Naomi Greene, *From Fu Manchu to Kung Fu Panda: Images of China in American Film* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014).

constructed in the pictures. Chapter three, for example, places *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933) and *Shanghai Express* (1932) in the context of traditional captivity narratives and the stereotypical view of Chinese men's lack of masculinity that was often presented in American fiction. My analysis of the two films later in this thesis engages with Marchetti's discussion but expands it through further consideration of the historical and political background of the period. It brings out, for example, the complexity of China's own political situation (including warlord/bandit problems, the Chinese Civil War, and the Japanese invasion) and the involvement of the Chinese Nationalists in Hollywood as they tried to shape the cinematic image of China. In the last chapter of *Romance and the "Yellow Peril"*, Marchetti argues that "... all these films seem to tell one story about American identity as both superficially liberal and deeply conservative with respect to racial and ethnic differences."²¹ This statement, the thesis will argue, was especially appropriate as a description of Hollywood productions about China during World War II.

During the war, the Federal Government intervened continuously in Hollywood, using commercial films as a propaganda tool to mobilise citizens behind its wartime priorities. The Administration led by Franklin D. Roosevelt created many organisations over the years for propaganda purposes, including the Office of Government Reports (OGR) in 1939, the Division of Information within the Office of Emergency Management in 1941, the Office of Facts and Figures (OFF) in 1941 and, most importantly, the Office of War Information (OWI) in 1942. Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black's *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (1987) demonstrates how the Roosevelt Administration in effect censored the US film industry during World War II, even well before the US's official involvement in the war, in order to make Hollywood serve its

²¹ Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 219.

political aims.²² In their chapter “Democrats Old and New: ‘Classless’ Britain and ‘Modern’ China,” Koppes and Black mobilise many statistics, polls, and original reviews of films to support their broader analysis. As they emphasise, two big-budget wartime films, *Dragon Seed* (1944) and *The Keys of the Kingdom* (1944), were both substantially recrafted by OWI, underlining the extent of its demands to, and guidelines for, film producers. The chapter indicates the extent of “co-operation” between the Federal government and Hollywood studios during the war, with the authors emphasising that “propaganda [in movies] is directly linked to policymakers’ perceptions of the world, and to the policies they pursue.”²³ This thesis will greatly expand on Koppes and Black’s analysis of the films *China* (1943), *Dragon Seed* (1944), and *The Keys of the Kingdom* (1944), which are only briefly discussed in *Hollywood Goes to War*, engaging with a broader range of primary source materials including OWI files, pressbooks and original film reviews. Using these materials enables this thesis to unravel some understudied aspects, for example, the problematic racial characterisation of Chinese people in American wartime pictures from the 1940s (the “white” Chinese versus the yellow “Japs”) and the pushbacks from both the OWI and the industry about the over-idealisation of Chinese people in such films. This thesis will argue, using detailed case studies based on archival materials, that the wartime images both of China and the Chinese in Hollywood films were essentially illusions created by the joint efforts of the Federal Government, the American film industry, and the Chinese Nationalist Government.

Dorothy B. Jones’s *The Portrayal of China and India on the American Screen, 1896-1955* (1955) was another pioneering work in this field. The book provided a long filmography pointing researchers to a broad range of “China” movies produced over more

²² BMP

²³ Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, p. 247.

than half a century.²⁴ One particularly intriguing aspect of Jones's work is that she categorised two types of portrayals of China/Chinese on American screens – “factual” and “fantasy.” The “factual” type refers to film footage that was actually shot in China and might be thought to have captured Chinese people's actual lives and conditions. It appeared for the most part in documentaries and newsreels. The “fantasy” type refers to fictional Chinese figures and stories that were set against a Chinese background. Ever since the 1910s, as Jones noted, the “fantasies” began to overtake the “factuals” in American cinema. By the 1920s, feature films about China were being made and very few of them were based on – or made reference to – news reports or newsreels about the actual China. At the beginning of the 1930s, when considerable coverage of Japan's atrocities in China appeared in the American daily news, footage taken in China, once again, was commonly shown in American cinemas, though they can hardly be considered as “factual” films anymore. Besides her authorship of this book, Dorothy B. Jones is relevant to this thesis for another reason: she served as a reviewer on the OWI committee, and provided many script and feature reviews for films about China during wartime. For this reason, her book on this subject is not merely a secondary work but complementary to the primary sources from the OWI collections. Jones's work, however, also has its limitations: the majority of the films mentioned are not analysed, and it lacked engagement with primary sources as it was published in 1955 (when many of the relevant materials were not as yet available to the public).

At a late stage of my PhD research, Hye Seung Chung published *Hollywood Diplomacy: Film Regulation, Foreign Relations, and East Asian Representations* (2020).²⁵

²⁴ Jones, Dorothy B., *The Portrayal of China and India on the American Screen, 1896-1955: The evolution of Chinese and Indian themes, locales, and characters as portrayed on the American screen* (Cambridge, Mass.: Centre for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1955)

²⁵ Hye Seung Chung, *Hollywood Diplomacy: Film Regulation, Foreign Relations, and East Asian Representations* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2020).

This book covers a long chronological period from the 1930s to 2010s, and it deals with the intersections between film censorship, Hollywood's self-regulation, and industrial relations in respect of films representing East Asian countries (China, Japan and Korea) and their peoples. In chapters one and two, Chung discusses the representations of China and Chinese people in American cinema in the 1930s and 1940s, relying on archival documents from the State Department and Department of Defense. Although part of her work and this thesis draw on a similar subject, the primary sources she has mainly consulted differ from those on which this thesis has been based—the PCA files, the OWI script and feature reviews, and reception materials. The divergent use of primary sources leads Chung's work and this thesis to very different conclusions, especially on whether the PCA and the Chinese Nationalist Government had tangible impacts on the representations of China and the Chinese in 1930s American cinema. Chung argues in chapter one of her book that Chinese Nationalist government agencies (such as the National Board of Film Censors [NBFC] and the Central Motion Picture Censorship Committee [CMPCC]) had gained the Chinese consuls some negotiating power in Hollywood – a power only diminished later by the dissolution of the CMPCC in 1938 – in shaping the image of China and its people. This thesis argues, however, in spite of the diplomatic pressure the Chinese Nationalists attempted to exert on Hollywood, that the stereotypical image of China and the Chinese remained largely unchallenged in American cinema, both before and after 1938, until the United States entered World War II.

Primary Sources

As indicated earlier, different types of primary sources are incorporated in this thesis including archival materials – the OWI documents and PCA collections – original film reviews, studios' pressbooks (publicity materials), and films themselves. The Production Code Administration (PCA)'s records located at the Margaret Herrick Library in Los

Angeles, California are extremely useful in shedding light on the impacts of Hollywood's industrial regulations and the Chinese consul's own involvement in the industry in the 1930s had on constructing China and its people in American movies. The Office of War Information (OWI) records held by the National Archives at College Park, Maryland, help to reveal the Federal government's wartime guidance to Hollywood on how "appropriately" to depict the Chinese in films under the exigencies of the war.

As for reception materials, the British Film Institute (BFI)'s Reuben Library holds a substantial collection of film reviews published by American trade magazines, including *The New York Times*, *Variety*, *The Motion Picture Herald*, and *Harrison's Reports*. This type of material demonstrates how the selected films were received by professional film critics, who often commented on the historical background and cultural context of the movies they were reviewing. Such film reviews do not always equate with box-office success or failure. Nor can they be regarded as necessarily representative of the views of historical audiences. Janet Staiger, one of the pioneers of reception studies in film, argued that the main purpose of such studies was not to identify how actual spectators interpreted a film but to establish "the range of possible readings and reading processes at historical moments and their relation to groups of historical spectators."²⁶ In practice, Staiger believed that analysing evidence of "historical reception" such as reviews – while they could not recover the voices and opinions of members of actual earlier audiences – could be used to help establish the parameters of interpretation. As she wrote in a book of 2005, "reception studies asks, what kind of meanings does a text have? For whom? In what circumstances? With what changes over time?"²⁷ One example of film reviews providing useful parameters of interpretation

²⁶ Janet Staiger, "'The Handmaiden of Villainy': Methods and Problems in Studying the Historical Reception of a Film," *Wide Angle*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1986), p. 20.

²⁷ Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies on the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Janet Staiger, *Media Reception Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), p. 2.

(discussed later in the thesis) is the divided opinions of contemporary film critics on the wartime film *Dragon Seed* (1944). While some praised the film's "progressive" representation of Chinese people as America's worthy allies, others dismissed the characterisations of Chinese played by white performers as awkward and unconvincing.

The BFI also holds a collection of Hollywood studios' pressbooks – the publicity materials created for each film – which, in some cases, help demonstrate what aspects of China and the Chinese were considered at different times by the production companies as "selling points" to attract a potential audience.

The United States' China Policy by the 1900s

During the first decade of the twentieth century, American policies toward China were often inconsistent. Internationally, the US government – responding to the demands of business and mercantile interests – wished to open the Chinese market and gain trading privileges. This policy was articulated by Secretary of State John Hay in his two "Open Door" notes of 1899 and 1900. Domestically, however, much of American public opinion was hostile to Chinese immigrants, and a series of Chinese Exclusion Acts since 1882 had attempted to prevent further Chinese immigration into the United States. The seeds of this contradictory situation – an open door to China and a closed door to the United States – had developed over many years since the earliest contacts between the United States and China.

The first Americans who went to China from the end of the eighteenth century onwards (and those who supported them in the US) mainly belonged to what might be considered the "three M's"—they were merchants, missionaries, and military. These people were characterised by historian Michael H. Hunt as the "open door constituency."²⁸ Within the "constituency," the mercantile community often had considerable political influence over

²⁸ Chang, *Fateful Ties*, p. 52.

the policy-making of the American government, especially in terms of urging more open and beneficial trading policies with China.²⁹ The missionaries, on the other hand, were much more influential with the American general public, particularly in terms of teaching Americans about China. Missionaries regularly reported first-hand information back home and many children of missionaries often spent a considerable amount of time in China while they were growing up. Some later became influential “China experts” in the US, sharing their views and understandings of China with American people more generally. Consequently, for many Americans, the first things they learned about China were from a missionary perspective. As Gordon Chang points out, this situation established an important undertone to the two countries’ foreign relations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³⁰ Americans were confident about their own cultural, economic and political superiority over the Chinese and, at times, even considered imperialistic methods – including using military coercion to break down China’s isolation and exclusionism – to be the best means of improving that country’s future.

The First Opium War (which took place in 1840-1842 between the Qing empire and the British) forcefully opened the door to China, effectively marking the beginning of Chinese modern history. The end of the war also saw the first of a series of unequal treaties imposed on China by western imperialistic powers. The US, though not one of the victorious parties in the First Opium War, managed to obtain the same beneficial treatments and privileges as the UK through the Treaty of Wanghia in 1844, negotiated by an American mission to China led by Caleb Cushing.³¹ The Second Opium War, waged by Britain, France, and the United States, began in 1856 and was finally ended in 1860 with the Convention of

²⁹ Hunt, *The Making of a Special Relationship*, p. 5.

³⁰ Chang, *Fateful Ties*, p. 52.

³¹ Ping Chia Kuo, “Caleb Cushing and the Treaty of Wanghia, 1844,” *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 5, no. 1 (March 1933), pp. 34-54.

Beijing. As the defeated party, the Qing empire was forced to sign a set of revised treaties, including ceding more parts of Hong Kong to Britain and parts of Manchuria to Russia, granting extraterritorial rights in China to Britain, France, Russia, and the United States, and paying indemnities. Facing growing pressure from both foreign imperialism and a civil war (the Taiping Rebellion), the Qing empire launched the Tongzhi Restoration in 1861, attempting to strengthen itself by enhancing its diplomacy, education, military, and industrial technologies. Although this self-strengthening movement in the end failed in its attempt to modernise the country and save the Manchurian monarchy, some profound reforms and measures had been implemented, including the establishment of *Zongli Yamen*—China’s first official foreign ministry dealing with international affairs.

Also in 1861, President Abraham Lincoln designated Anson Burlingame, a Republican politician, as minister to China. During his mission, Burlingame and William Seward, the Secretary of State and a political ally of Burlingame, drafted the Cooperative Policy—the later Burlingame Treaty in prototype—suggesting the United States treat China more fairly and respect its sovereignty and territorial integrity. In part as a result of Burlingame’s respectful manner, which China had not experienced by any western imperialist powers at least since the First Opium War, the Qing Empire unprecedentedly entrusted Burlingame with a new role as China’s own envoy to the West in 1867. A leading Republican paper, *Daily Alta California* in San Francisco, claimed when the news of the appointment was announced that China had “converted a citizen of the youngest nation of the world into the Ambassador to the oldest.”³² In pressing for a fair treaty with China during 1867 and 1868, Burlingame himself astutely linked such a treaty with the foregrounding of racial equality in the Republican Party’s new policy of “Radical Reconstruction” in relation to the ex-

³² John Schrecker, “For the Equality of Men – For the Equality of Nations: Anson Burlingame and China’s First Embassy to the United States, 1868,” *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2010), p. 14.

Confederate states. In a speech of 23 June 1868 in New York, Burlingame argued that “there are people who will tell you that ... it is the duty of the Western Treaty Powers to combine for the purpose of coercing China into reforms, which they may desire, and which she may not desire, who undertake to say that this people has no rights which you are bound to respect.” This last phrase effectively repositioned better and more tolerant relations with China as a cause related to the struggle for black rights in America, rephrasing the notorious Supreme Court decision in the *Dred Scott* case (1857) that black people “had no right which the white man was bound to respect.”³³

During the late 1860s, partisan affiliation dominated many Americans’ views of China, with Burlingame’s political position and his strategic rhetoric gaining him huge support from Republicans. On 28 July 1868, the so-called Burlingame Treaty (officially designated *Additional articles to the treaty between the United States of American and the Ta-Tsing Empire of the 18th of June, 1868*) was signed, the same day as the official ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment that for the first time defined all those born in the United States (including African Americans) as citizens of the United States and endeavoured to protect them against future attempts to limit their rights. Although the synchronization of the two events was a coincidence, it spoke to the sense of radicalism in questions of race that characterised this period in American history.³⁴

Burlingame’s treaty (eight articles in total) was significant on many levels. Articles one to three defended China’s autonomy in commercial regulations, asserted its territorial integrity, and recognised the nation’s sovereignty. Burlingame believed that these articles would weaken the negative influences of the existing unequal treaties. The rest of the articles disavowed the discriminatory laws against the Chinese on the West Coast, guaranteed free

³³ Ibid., p. 20.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 27.

Chinese emigration to the United States, and protected immigrants' legal rights in the country. For example, it allowed Chinese immigrants to obtain US citizenship and the admission of Chinese children to American public schools.³⁵

However, while Burlingame and his treaty were supported by the Republicans, they were often targeted for criticism by the Democrats. Some extremely hostile Democratic views of the treaty appeared in the San Francisco newspaper, *The Daily Morning Call*, which vehemently declared that "we do not think the people here will tamely submit to such an infamous imposition. This country cannot be given up to hordes of Asiatics in order to please a few Eastern humanitarians and usurping politicians."³⁶ Burlingame died in 1870 while still on his mission. His treaty, though only valid for less than fifteen years, had profound influence on US-China relations and Chinese immigration into the United States. Yet the relatively harmonious situation it created changed drastically after Burlingame's death, beginning with the anti-Chinese movement in the 1870s. California, as the state in which the majority of Chinese immigrants resided, witnessed the most severe of these anti-Chinese sentiments.

There was no one single reason to explain why anti-Chinese sentiment peaked in the 1870s in California. One contributory factor could be that the cultural barriers between Chinese and whites (the exotic attires, languages, and even the Buddhist religion of the former) were causing misunderstandings and frictions between the two, and the Chinese were unwilling to give up on their traditions and ways of living to acculturate completely into America's. With the sharp increase of Chinese immigration as the result of the Burlingame treaty, such antagonism only increased. White politicians complained that, after years spent living in the United States, Chinese people were still outsiders from mainstream society,

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 28-30.

³⁶ *Daily Morning Call* (San Francisco), August 1868, quoted in Schrecker, "For the Equality of Men," p. 33.

living only with other Chinese in self-created Chinatowns and maintaining their own lifestyles and values. Nevada Republican Thomas Fitch claimed in the House of Representatives in 1870 that the Chinese had “a distinct civilization, religion, habits, and language of their own; a race who are alike incapable and unworthy of assimilation of ours.”³⁷ There was even a subsequent fear that American culture would lose out under the influence of the powerful and immovable Chinese culture brought to the country by the rapidly increasing Chinese immigration. California Republican congressman Horace Page boldly remarked when advocating a Chinese exclusion law that the overpopulated Chinese could easily overwhelm America and take over the US as an extension of the Chinese Empire.³⁸

“The religious leaders, who had previously heralded the coming Chinese as a wonderous development for evangelism,” Ming Zhu has argued, now cautioned “that the arrival of the heathen Chinese could be the end of American Christianity.”³⁹ Another reason for the intensified anti-Chinese sentiment in this period was pre-existing racial prejudice, since many residents in California at that point were from the South.⁴⁰ Fear of miscegenation between Chinese and whites was itself very common in California during this period. For instance, John F. Miller, a member of the state’s constitutional convention in 1878, claimed that the Chinese were “the lowest, most vile, and degraded of our race” and the marriage between a white person and a Chinese would be “a hybrid of the most despicable, a mongrel of the most detestable that have ever afflicted the earth.” In 1880, the same year Miller was

³⁷ Ming M. Zhu, “The Page Act of 1875: In the Name of Morality,” *SSRN (Social Science Research Network)*, 23 March 2010, p. 8. Retrieved from: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1577213#:~:text=The%20Page%20Act%20of%201875%20is%20usually%20characterized%20as%20an,Chinese%20Exclusion%20Act%20of%201882.&text=The%20Page%20Act%20is%20thus,avoid%20legal%20or%20political%20backlash.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

⁴⁰ McKee, *Chinese Exclusion versus the Open Door Policy*, p. 21.

elected as one of the US senators from California, the state enacted legislation to prohibit the marriage of a white and “a negro, mulatto, or Mongolian.”⁴¹ Discrimination against the Chinese at this time was not only popular but institutional.

Among the factors that may have aggravated anti-Chinese sentiment in 1870s America, economic factors were probably the most crucial. Since the Burlingame Treaty, a growing number of Chinese had emigrated to the United States and the number of the Chinese residents in the West peaked in the 1870s at a total of 102,102, comprising 8.7 percent of California’s population according to the 1880 census.⁴² Many of these had arrived to take jobs in building the first continental railroad and other local railroads. But, after the completion of the Central Pacific Railroad in 1869, there were not many similar jobs immediately available for Chinese labourers to take up. Consequently, they often proved willing to take employment in any kind of job, even at very low rates of pay, and this created problems during the US economic depression that began in 1873.⁴³ During the 1870s depression, the state unemployment rate began to creep up from 3.99 percent in 1873 to the peak point at 8.25 percent in 1878.⁴⁴ Business houses, industries, mines and banks were closed down – California faced its greatest financial and industrial crisis up to that time. According to Ira Cross, thousands of men “tramped” city streets and country roads seeking for jobs in California, and it sometimes required police forces to maintain order and clear thoroughfares when crowds gathered in search of potential job opportunities.⁴⁵ White workers went on strike to defend their jobs and wages, even using violence at times (for example,

⁴¹ Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, pp. 101-102.

⁴² Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p. 71.

⁴³ McKee, *Chinese Exclusion versus the Open Door Policy, 1900-1906*, p. 22.

⁴⁴ J. R. Vernon, “Unemployment Rate in Postbellum America: 1869-1899,” *Journal of Macroeconomics*, vol. 16, no. 4 (1994), p. 710.

⁴⁵ Ira Brown Cross, *A History of the Labor Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1935), p. 71.

during the Railroad Strikes of 1877).

Chinese emigrant workers, on the contrary, had the reputation of asking for lower wages and working harder. According to social critic Henry George, “the superintendents of the cotton and woollen mills on the Pacific prefer the Chinese to the other operatives, and in the same terms the railroad people speak of their Chinese graders, saying they are steadier, work longer, require less watching, and do not get up strikes or go on drunks.”⁴⁶ Charles Crocker, an American railroad executive, claimed in his testimony before the Joint Special Committee to Investigate Chinese Immigration on 14 November 1876 that, although he did not trust the Chinese for heavy work in the beginning, he gradually found them very reliable when they were given big jobs. “They work themselves into our favour to such an extent,” Crocker claimed, “that if we found we were in a hurry for a job of work, it was better to put Chinese on at once.”⁴⁷ Crocker also expressed his “belief” in America’s need for Chinese workers as a way to elevate white workers in class terms. He claimed that the cheap Chinese labourers replaced white workers in the low-skilled workforce, consequently lifting them up to managerial level or skill-required positions, while Crocker claimed that the *number* of white employees actually increased along with the influx of Chinese workers:

I believe that the effect of Chinese labor upon white labor has an elevating instead of a degrading tendency. I think that every white laborer who is intelligent and able to work, who is more than a digger in a ditch, or a man with a pick and a shovel, who has the capacity of being something else, can get to be something else by the presence of Chinese labor easier than he could without it. As I said before, when we were working 800 white men, and that was the extent we could get, we began to put on Chinamen. Instead of our white force decreasing, it increased, and when we had 8, 9,

⁴⁶ Henry George, “The Chinese on the Pacific Coast,” *New York Tribune*, 1 May 1869, quoted in Takaki, *A History of Asian Americans*, p. 109.

⁴⁷ Charles Crocker, testimony, *Report of the Joint Special Committee to Investigate Chinese Immigration* (The Senate report, 1877), p. 667.

and 10 thousand Chinaman on the work, we had from 2,500 to 3,000 white men. Instead of these white men being engaged shoveling dirt, or with a pick and shovel, they were teamsters, mechanics, foremen, and men in elevated grade of labor, receiving wages far above what they would have done if we had had the same number throwing up the dirt and digging in the rock ... I believe, to-day, if the Chinese labor was driven out of this State, if there are 75,000 Chinese laborers here to-day, there are 75,000 white laborers who would have to come down from the elevated classes of labor they are now engaged in and take the place of these Chinamen, and therefore it would degrade white labor instead of elevating it.⁴⁸

Although what Crocker said could be seen merely as an excuse on the part of employers who wanted to maximise their benefits by using cheap labour, the choice of capitalists like him to hire cheaper Chinese labourers infuriated white workers. Some important labour organisations of the day (the Knights of Labour and the Workingmen's Party, for example) opposed Chinese immigration with the slogan "The Chinese Must Go."⁴⁹ Although this opposition to the Chinese was most severe in California, many members of the US Congress in general were starting to believe that modifications to the Burlingame Treaty were needed. Female Chinese immigrants were the first to be targeted in the US. As early as 1871, a Republican Congressman from Connecticut had criticised the Chinese as "a race with whom polygamy is a practice and female chastity is not a virtue," suggesting the moral depravity of Chinese women.⁵⁰ Three years later, Republican Congressman Horace Page of California condemned the Chinese before the House of Representatives in a similar light as Fitch, singling out women in particular, suggesting that many of them were morally questionable or had been forced to engage in prostitution:

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 667-68.

⁴⁹ McKee, *Chinese Exclusion versus the Open Door Policy, 1900-1906*, p. 22.

⁵⁰ Zhu, "The Page Act of 1875", p. 10.

The relationships between parent and child are like those of master and slave. The father sells his son into servitude and his daughter for prostitution ... Polygamy and concubinage are national institutions. Thieving, trickery, cheating and fraud are taught and encouraged as essential elements of success in all commercial operations ... the Chinese have had all that is good, noble and refined in their nature crushed out ... [the Chinese] bring their women here as slaves to be sold into prostitution, and ... openly flaunt their immoral calling on the public streets in the very face of our wives and daughters ...⁵¹

Also in Congress, Senator John S. Hager, a California Democrat, shared Page's view and stressed that the Chinese "bring females under contracts for purpose too vile for [him] even to mention in [the] Chamber." Horace then appealed for immigration restriction to prevent Chinese women specifically from coming to the United States:

I do believe that this Government has the right and ought to exercise it to prevent the immigration of any class of people to this country whose moral and social relations, whose habits and mode of life, are so at variance with the genius of our institutions, that they would cause the blush of shame to mantle the cheek of the most depraved of our own race.⁵²

In 1875, President Ulysses S. Grant responded to such appeals and remarked to the 43rd Congress: "I invite the attention to Congress of another ... evil—the importation of Chinese women, but few of whom are brought to our shores to pursue honorable or useful occupations."⁵³ In the same year, proposed initially by Congressman Page, the Page Act of 1875 (a Federal law largely based on the California anti-prostitution statute) was ratified to ban all Chinese women from entering the United States. The passage of the Page Act

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 10-20.

⁵² Ibid., p. 20.

⁵³ Zhu, "The Page Act of 1875: In the Name of Morality," p. 18, quoting United States Congress, Proceedings and Debates of the 44th Congress.

indicated that the harmonious “Burlingame era” of the two nations was approaching an end, and stricter immigration laws would discourage Chinese people who planned to go the US. According to Ming Zhu, although the rhetoric surrounding the Page Act was largely focused on preventing a threat to American morality, the real driving force behind its ratification was labour-oriented. Page, indeed, had himself already divulged the true intention in 1874:

What ... if these Chinese should take the place of the thousands of women and girls who are now employed in the Middle and New England States, and thereby throw out of employment thousands of this class who depend upon their daily toil for a subsistence? ... in the name of justice and consistency do something to protect our languishing and starving poor laborers, who have to contend with these Asiatics from whom our people must flee as from a pestilence.⁵⁴

The passage of the Page Act helped pave the way for the more general Chinese Exclusion Acts. In 1880, the first Federal legislation was introduced against Chinese labourers in the United States. Two years later, despite the protests of the pro-China groups (mainly businessmen and missionaries), the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was introduced to prohibit Chinese labourers from entering the United States and suspending the granting of US citizenship to Chinese people for ten years.⁵⁵ This act was the first specific piece of Federal legislation restricting a particular national group from entry to the United States. After the adoption of the exclusion policy, a further law was passed in 1884 to prohibit current Chinese workers’ wives from entering the United States.⁵⁶

In the following years, a series of extensions and renewals of the exclusion policy

⁵⁴ McKee, *Chinese Exclusion versus the Open Door Policy, 1900-1906*, p. 21.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 24.

⁵⁶ Chiung Hwang Chen, “Feminization of Asian (American) Men in the U.S. Mass Media: An Analysis of *The Ballad of Little Jo*,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 20, no. 2 (Fall, 1996), p. 59.

were implemented. The Scott Act of 1 October 1888 prohibited two thousand Chinese, who had been granted permits of entry by the American government, from entering the country. The Geary Act of 5 May 1892 extended the existing exclusion laws for another ten years while requiring stricter procedures for Chinese who wanted to go to the United States. In addition, the act also “authorized arrest without warrant or oath.”⁵⁷ With Terence V. Powderly, the former leader of the Knights of Labor, calling for a *total* exclusion of the Chinese in 1898, the Chinese Exclusion Law of 1902 was finally signed by the new president, Theodore Roosevelt. This not only prohibited Chinese labourers but also upper-class Chinese from entering the United States. It further extended existing regulations to new territories—Hawaii and the Philippines.

After China’s defeat by Japan in the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, European powers joined Japan in order to partition China. Against this background, the first “Open Door” Notes were formulated by American Secretary of State John Hay in order to try to preserve US commercial access to China in the face of encroachment by other world powers. The Open Door Policy, while it strongly defended China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, essentially invited foreign powers, who had acquired spheres of influence in China, to agree not to interfere within their spheres with other countries’ commercial activities and tariff duties. Under such a system, foreign powers would have secured equal access to all parts of China.⁵⁸ As a country that had not yet acquired a sphere of influence in China, the United States benefited from the “Open Door” policy the most because its growing trade with China, in this way, would not be hindered by other imperialist powers.

According to Warren I. Cohen, although the other nations (including Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Russia, and Japan) were not enthusiastic about American proposals

⁵⁷ McKee, *Chinese Exclusion versus the Open Door Policy*, pp. 24-25.

⁵⁸ Cohen, *America’s Response to China*, p. 44.

since they gained little from them, they also believed that they had little to lose. Most of these nations, therefore, formally accepted the existence of the policy to avoid gratuitously offending the United States, then the youngest world power. The Open Door Policy was successful in safeguarding American commercial interests in China, but it also left controversy in its wake. It was ranked by political journalist Walter Lippmann second only to the Monroe Doctrine in the history of American foreign relations as a representation of American nobility in international affairs. To Lippmann, it seemed the “expression of the American political religion.”⁵⁹ Yet American responses to the Open Door ranged across the spectrum. As Chang writes: “To some, it symbolized a naïve, fuzzy sentimentality toward others based on good intentions but an unclear identification of real interests and capabilities; to others, the Open Door was about advancing American commercial interests at the expense of its avowed support for national self-determination.”⁶⁰ At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the Qing empire itself favoured the Open Door policy because it allowed the US to de-monopolise other countries’ domination in different regions of China.

Mistreatment of Chinese immigrants on the United States’ home front coincided with the expansion of imperial-style activities in China by both the U.S. and other western countries.⁶¹ This unequal situation infuriated many patriotic Chinese (particularly merchants and students), and anti-imperialism sentiment began to grow in China in the 1890s. In 1899 and 1900, anti-foreign sentiment reached a peak, and the “Boxer Rebellion” took place in northern China, led by a group of grassroots insurgents (who were later supported by the Qing empire). The Boxers killed thousands of missionaries and their Chinese converts and besieged legations and settlements in Beijing and Tianjin. In response to the insurrection, an Eight-Nation Alliance (Austria-Hungary, the British Empire, Germany, France, Italy, Russia,

⁵⁹ Chang, *Fateful Ties*, p. 104.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 44.

Japan, and the United States) sent troops to crush the Boxers. Foreseeing the predictable defeat of the Boxer Rebellion, U.S. Secretary of State John Hay issued the second Open Door Note in 1900, again appealing for the preservation of China's territorial integrity and equal commercial access for all the western powers to China. The Boxer Uprising ended with the Boxer Protocol (another unequal treaty) signed in September 1901, and the US took its share of the indemnity (\$25 million out of \$333 million in total) required from the Qing government.⁶²

Broad anti-foreign sentiment in China, however, did not decline after the end of the Boxer Rebellion. The American government's unequal Chinese-Exclusion/Open-Door strategies finally evoked a nationwide boycott of American products in China beginning in Shanghai in 1905. The boycott was later supported by Qing officials because such economic pressure strengthened their bargaining power with the US in treaty negotiations. President Roosevelt, therefore, found himself in a dilemma in 1905 because the exclusion law was sabotaging the Open Door Policy.⁶³ From this point onwards, Roosevelt himself began to attempt to change the exclusionist-dominated narrative and to soften Chinese merchants' resistance to American exports, even though formally and legally an overall exclusionist policy toward Chinese immigration persisted in the US until the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

The principal reason why the Federal government was willing to make gestures to placate the Chinese in the early 1900s was because of the enduring myth of a "China Market" of four hundred million customers. Many Americans had high expectations for the market in China as early as the mid-nineteenth century, believing it to be an ideal solution for what some saw as the problem of surplus production in the US. According to Paul A. Varg,

⁶² Sutter, *U.S.-China Relations*, pp. 26-29.

⁶³ Chang, *Fateful Ties*, p. 108.

historians including Charles Campbell, Julius Pratt, and Walter Lafeber have documented American mercantile groups' extravagant interest in the "China Market" during the 1890s, while the reality of the Chinese trade market at the time, however, contradicted such an optimistic American outlook.⁶⁴ Beside endemic poverty, which hindered the development of a lucrative "China Market," an undeveloped transportation system further limited the circulation of foreign products, making them only accessible in coastal/portal cities but not the interior of China where many of the supposed "four hundred million customers" resided. In the 1890s and 1900s, in fact, China only absorbed 3 percent of America's total exports to the world, and such a situation did not change significantly until the late twentieth century.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, many Americans at the turn of the twentieth century continued to view China as a financial opportunity with great potential, continuing to dream of the mythical "China Market" and remaining anxious that other nations might monopolise China for themselves.⁶⁶

China itself also underwent an enormous political transformation from the late nineteenth century. Realising its own incompetence on the world stage, the Chinese imperial government (the Qing Manchurian rulers) from the 1880s reached out for financial aid to overseas Chinese citizens. According to Philip A. Kuhn, the government's loyalist reformers, led by Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, advocated "modern state building under a constitutional monarchy" and gathered support for their *Baohuanghui* (Emperor Protection Society, 保皇会). Meanwhile, the revolutionists led by Sun Yat-Sen, who later was the first leader of the Kuomintang (KMT, the Chinese Nationalist Party) and became known as the Father of the Republic of China, used his overseas Chinese connections to compete with the loyalists for funds and support. Both of Sun's *Xingzhonghui* (Revive China Society, 兴中会,

⁶⁴ Paul A. Varg, "The Myth of the China Market, 1890-1914," *American Historical Review*, vol. 73, no. 3 (1968), p. 742.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 742-46.

⁶⁶ Schaller, *The United States and China*, p. 17.

founded in 1894 in Hawaii) and *Tongmenghui* (Revolutionary Alliance, 同盟会, founded in 1905 in Tokyo) relied largely on Chinese immigrant communities abroad for political and financial support.⁶⁷ This overall unstable political background (e. g. the Chinese Han revolutionists versus Manchurians) was captured and reported by the American press, and often reflected in American films about China produced in the early twentieth century. It is worth noting here, therefore, that Chinese-Americans were subject to diverse and complex pressures at the beginning of the twentieth century, knowing their homeland was being considerably encroached upon by other countries, possibly themselves becoming involved in China's own political struggles, and facing discriminating exclusionist acts in the United States.

In the United States itself, the early years of the twentieth century were crucial ones in the evolution of American cinema. The first nickelodeon was established in Pittsburgh in 1905 and, over just five years, the number of nickelodeons grew to more than 10,000. For the first time, films could be shown in a place designed specifically for their exhibition, as opposed to their projection "in vaudeville theatres, opera houses, cafés, storefronts, summer parks, churches and church halls, YMCAs, department stores and schools."⁶⁸ The following years saw the new film industry developing rapidly in the United States. In its treatment of Chinese themes and issues, the new industry found itself engaged in a complex negotiation between the fantasies concerning the Far East, the myth of a massive market awaiting to be conquered, and the widespread white social prejudice against the Chinese.

Hollywood's China, from the beginning of its existence, was an interesting "production" that mirrored intricate political and social realism though usually in the form of

⁶⁷ Philip A. Kuhn, *Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), p. 244.

⁶⁸ Melvyn Stokes, "Introduction: Reconstructing American Cinema's Audiences," in Stokes and Richard Maltby, eds., *American Movie Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), p. 2.

pure fantasies. In the first half of twentieth century, many Chinese characters were created by Hollywood – some of them are still remembered and often being referred to and studied today; the rest of them, however, are largely forgotten. To study the evolving image of China and the Chinese in American cinema does not only demonstrate how China has been understood and misunderstood by western media, it also provides a perspective to examine Americans' own assumptions about themselves and the world around them.

Major Stereotypes of the Chinese in American Films

The most remembered Chinese fictional characters created in the twentieth century were Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu. For decades, film scholars and historians have conducted substantial research on the two characters essentially because they exemplify the two fundamental sets of images of China in western culture – the civilised and the barbaric. According to Harold Isaacs, the admirable image of China as a highly civilised nation initially came from Marco Polo's depictions of Chinese people with attributes such as "high intelligence, persistent industry, filial piety, peacefulness, stoicism." Such positive impressions dominated western countries' perceptions of China before the Industrial Revolution.⁶⁹ The hostile and, sometimes, fearful views of China, on the other hand, originated from the history of Genghis Khan and his Mongolian armies aggressively expanding territorially all the way to Europe in the thirteenth century. Though the powerful Mongolian tribesmen's frantic expansion is utterly different to and divergent from Chinese/Han history, the memory of the ruthless Eastern invasion of the West became somehow associated with China in many western minds, encouraging negative impressions of the Chinese to develop. These included "cruelty, barbarism, inhumanity; a faceless, impenetrable, overwhelming mass, irresistible if once loosed" – ideas, as Harold R. Isaacs

⁶⁹ Isaacs, *Scratches on our Minds*, p. 63.

pointed out, that came to underpin the notion of the “Yellow Peril.”⁷⁰

These two sets of images of China the civilised and China the barbaric, Isaacs claims, were “never wholly displacing each other, always coexisting, each ready to emerge at the fresh call of circumstance, always new, yet instantly garbed in all the words and pictures of a much written literature, made substantial and unique in each historic instance by the reality of recurring experience.”⁷¹ On many occasions in American history, indeed, when anti-Chinese sentiments peaked, the unsympathetic stereotype of Chinese people being a faceless horde and ruthless invaders – the overpopulated “Yellow Peril” – would recur in (and at times even dominate) American media and public opinion. Examples of this would include a series of anti-Chinese caricatures that appeared in the late nineteenth century (during the Chinese Exclusion era) depicting Chinese labourers as huge swarms of pests flooding to American soil and the fearful images of the massed Chinese Communist army crossing the Yalu River that would later emerge in the US during the Korean War. More recently, in 2019, when the US waged a tariff war towards China and started a dispute over Huawei – a Chinese information and communications company – this antiquated stereotype was brought up again by David P. Goldman, an American economist and columnist, who compared the current situation the US is facing in trade terms to the siege and invasion of Baghdad by Mongol troops led by Hulagu Khan, a grandson of Genghis Khan.⁷² The recurrence of such negative images of China (associating with aggressiveness, invasion, unfathomability, and overpopulation) indicate the extent to which this “China” is imprinted in western culture as an ultimate foe, always ready to be refreshed whenever the US-China relationship is at a low ebb.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Urs Gehrig, “You Can Never be China’s Friend: Spengler,” *Asia Times*, 21 October 2019. Retrieved from: <https://asiatimes.com/2019/10/you-can-never-be-chinas-friend-spengler/>

Within these two contrasting sets of images of China, stereotypes of the Chinese have been analysed through various subcategories, for instance, gender, religion (“heathens” or “converts”), and political stance (Manchurians, Nationalists, warlords/bandits, or Communists). In studying cinematic stereotypes of the Chinese created in the first half of the twentieth century, it is notable that they are mostly gender-specific, and sexuality is often strategically used to define a Chinese as good or not. In portraying Chinese men, for example, the sympathetic characters are often presented as either asexual, unattractive, or abstinent. These “positive” yet often desexualised Chinese male characters are represented by the romanticised “Chinaman” Cheng Huan in David W. Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms* (1919), the amiable detective Charlie Chan, and – much later – a series of powerful but monkish Kung Fu masters. The famous character Charlie Chan, though applauded by many, including the Chinese audience in China in 1930s, as a positive and progressive representation of Chinese people, was also from its creation a typical desexualisation of Chinese men. According to Yunte Huang, the first description of Chan by its author Earl Derr Biggers was that “Chan is ‘fat,’ which means he is either chubby and lovable or oafish and ugly. He walks ‘with the light dainty step of a woman,’ which means he is unobtrusive and agile, or he is effeminate.”⁷³ On the other hand, when a Chinese man is presented with sexual urges, especially toward white women, he is usually portrayed unsympathetically as a villain as with the evil mastermind Fu Manchu and a series of warlord/bandit characters depicted in the 1930s.

This logic of desexualising the Chinese male characters to make them acceptable to the American public reflects, and at the same time reinforces, the notion that a good Chinese man needs to “know his place” and is not to be treated as an equal to his white counterpart.

⁷³ Yunte Huang, *Charlie Chan: the Untold Story of the Honorable Detective and His Rendezvous with American History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), p. 1897 (Kindle version).

The situation, however, is very different when it comes to representing Chinese women in American films – here both the favourable and the unfavourable female types are sexualised. In the 1910s and 1920s, a sympathetic stereotype of Chinese women appeared in many feature films. This type was later categorised as “Lotus Flower,” named after Anna May Wong’s character in an early colour feature film called *The Toll of the Sea* (1922). The film is essentially a Chinese variation of *Madame Butterfly* – an opera by Giacomo Puccini first performed in 1904 that centres on a romanticised Japanese woman Cio-Cio-San and her tragic love affair with a white man.⁷⁴ The “Lotus Flowers,” similar to their Japanese counterpart, often fall in love with English or American young men, bear their children, and would sacrifice their lives to honour their loyalty. The Madame Butterfly/Lotus Flower stereotype was the major type of East Asian women image to be seen in American cinema before the 1930s, for example as San San in *Forbidden City* (1918) and Nang Ping in *Mr. Wu* (1927). This stereotype represents the traditional Orientalism in western culture, viewing the East as feminine, fertile, and obedient. Moreover, the repeating narratives of “Lotus Flowers” getting impregnated by white men out of wedlock, sometimes followed by a furious Chinese father’s revenge, reflect, to some extent, a social consciousness of the immorality of western imperialism and its exploitation of the Far East, as well as an anxiety about consequential retaliations by the exploited.

From the beginning of the 1930s, however, an alternative and unsympathetic stereotype of a Chinese woman as the “Dragon Lady” emerged in Hollywood cinema, originating with Anna May Wong’s role as Fu Manchu’s daughter in the film *The Daughter of Dragon* (1931). “Dragon Ladies” are hypersexualised, seductive, revengeful, and destructively powerful – they are, indeed, the female version of the traditional Yellow Peril

⁷⁴ Puccini’s opera, based on a short story by John Luther Long and a David Belasco play, was first performed in 1904 and – beginning in 1915 – would several times be made into a film.

represented by Fu Manchu. Famous “Dragon Ladies” include Ling Moy in *The Daughter of the Dragon*, Fah Lo See in *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932), and Mother Gin Sling in *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941). They are not only capable of avenging the white men who have wronged them, but also shown subversive to the social norms expected from western women – for example, the representations of Fah Lo See sexually exploiting a white man and Mother Gin Sling murdering her own daughter – all of which was essentially associated with the impression of the Chinese as being uncivilised and unfathomable.

From the beginning of the 1930s, increasing number of films about China centred on Chinese bandit/warlord characters, generating a new warlord film cycle. These Chinese warlords were presented in Hollywood films (as they were in reality) as largely resembling the medieval robber barons in Europe, the feudal landowners using unscrupulous methods to gain wealth. The Chinese warlord film cycle, which will be discussed in this thesis, resonated with the American general public’s then popular criticism of the American “Robber Barons,” the wealthy but unethical industrialists during the Gilded Age and later during the Great Depression. These warlord films are represented by *Shanghai Express* (1932), *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933), *The General Died at Dawn* (1936), and *West of Shanghai* (1937).

By the late 1930s, news coverage of the Second Sino-Japanese conflict frequently appeared in American media, encouraging the development of a more realistically sympathetic view of Chinese people and their sufferings from political chaos, foreign invasion, and natural disasters. Such a view was best exemplified in *The Good Earth*, a best-selling and Pulitzer prize-winning novel, published in 1931, about a Chinese peasant family’s plight, written by the famous American author (and once herself a missionary child) Pearl S. Buck. The novel was so popular that it was purchased by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) and made into a film adaption that was released in 1937. The story helped foster a new impression of the Chinese as an earthy and tenacious people, being unfairly victimised by

political turmoil and famines but steadfastly attempting to survive all the adversities they encountered. It was rare in the American film industry, up to that point, to produce a story centring on Chinese people alone; it was also unprecedented in American cinema to portray the Chinese as multifaceted ordinary people struggling to survive a range of ordeals.

Moreover, *The Good Earth* was the first Hollywood picture in which the Chinese Nationalist government was involved throughout production, including having a Chinese government-appointed officer as technical adviser and allowing a Chinese committee to make suggestions on how the film should be completed. *The Good Earth* left – in Harold Isaac’s terminology – “scratches” on thousands of American minds about China. It was also considered a special episode in the history of US-China cooperation in non-diplomatic affairs.

During World War II, especially after the US entered the war in December 1941, the Federal government began directly to influence the construction of the images of the Chinese in American commercial films for what it saw as war needs. As a consequence, a series of unrealistic representations of Chinese people – the highly Americanised “white” Chinese – emerged under the exigencies of the war. The emergence of such problematically positive representations in Hollywood was synchronised with press coverage of the “westernised” Chinese political leader General Chiang Kai-shek, who converted to Methodism after his marriage with Soong Mei-ling (Madame Chiang). Meanwhile, the Christian and American-university-educated Chinese first lady toured the US in 1943, lobbying for financial and political support for the Chinese Nationalist government. The Chiangs’ high-profile presence in American media, Hollywood’s portrayals of a “New China” in films, and the two governments’ joint efforts to subvert the existing stereotypes of Chinese people on film completely misled the American public about the true political situation in China.⁷⁵ In

⁷⁵ In fact, modernity for China was never as simple as the image of an Americanised and converted China that the governments proposed in American media during the war

combination, they exaggerated the importance of the Kuomintang government in the wartime and post-war world while neglecting the growing power of the Chinese Communist Party. Although the wartime representations of the Chinese are positive, they stand out from the conventional sets of images of China, which were culturally constructed through centuries of interactions, perceptions and prejudices. Hollywood's wartime China, on the contrary, was consciously manipulated by governmental forces to fulfil propaganda purposes.

Following the war, the two traditionally contrasting sets of images of China – “sage wisdom and superstitious ignorance, great strength and contemptible weakness, immovable conservatism and unpredictable extremism, philosophic calm and explosive violence” – returned to American cinema, coexisting and interchanging, speaking to the differing political and cultural relationships between the US and China that existed over time.⁷⁶ Hollywood's representations of Chinese people was never as simple as either Marco Polo or Genghis Khan, Fu Manchu or Charlie Chan, “Lotus Flower” or “Dragon lady.” Through Hollywood's decades of construction of China and Chinese people in American cinema, we understand not only American but, to some extent, the entire western world's evolving perception and understanding of China as a country.

Chapter One: The Origins of Hollywood's Early Representations of China and the Chinese people

Cultural construction of Chinese people in the United States in the nineteenth century had much to do with complicated labour struggles dating back to the “Gold Rush” era. A popular personification of China – John Chinaman – was created during this period. Many cartoons,

years. Both Sun Yat-sen (who also had connections to Christianity) and Chiang Kai-shek actually promoted certain Confucian elements and principles in reforming the Chinese nation.

⁷⁶ Isaacs, *Scratches on our Minds*, pp. 63-64.

books, and folk songs used it (often in a deeply derogatory way) to refer to China and the Chinese. For example, a song named “John Chinaman” published in *The California Songster* in 1855 at the end of the California Gold Rush, expressed anti-Chinese sentiment and in particular the conviction amongst many white workers that the Chinese were unassimilable:

John Chinaman, John Chinaman
 But five short years ago,
 I welcomed you from Canton, John—
 But wish I hadn't though;

For then I thought you honest, John,
 Not dreaming but you'd make
 A citizen as useful, John
 As any in the state.

I thought you'd open wide your ports
 And let our merchants in
 To barter for their crapes and teas,
 Their wares of wood and tin.

I thought you'd cut your queue off, John,
 And don a Yankee coat,
 And a collar high you'd raise, John,
 Around your dusky throat.

I imagined that the truth, John,
 You'd speak when under oath,
 But I find you'll lie and steal too—
 Yes, John, you're up to both.

I thought of rats and puppies, John,
 You'd eaten your last fill;

But on such slimy pot-pies, John,
I'm told you dinner still.

Oh, John, I've been deceived in you,
And all your thieving clan,
For our gold is all you're after, John,
To get it as you can.¹

This song complains about China's refusal to open its ports to the West (presumably a reference to earlier struggles over the Opium trade, which cause the outbreak of the First Opium War from 1839 to 1842). It also presents images of an unhygienic, deceitful, and untrustworthy Chinese man with an odd appearance – he is, probably, in a loose-fitted robe with his long queue hanging from his half-shaved head. Similar descriptions of Chinese people being unassimilable in America are also found in Jacob Riis' 1890's book *How the Other Half Lives*. In the section documenting the environment of Chinatown in New York, Riis wrote:

... I state it in advance as my opinion, based on the steady observation of years, that all attempts to make an effective Christian of John Chinaman will remain abortive in this generation; of the next I have, if anything, less hope ... I am convinced that he adopts Christianity, when he adopts it at all, as he puts on American clothes, with what the politicians would call an ulterior motive, some sort of gain in the near prospect—washing, a Christian wife perhaps, anything he happens to rate for the moment above his cherished pigtail. It may be that I judge him too harshly. Exceptions may be found. Indeed, for the credit of the race, I hope there are such. But I am bound to say my hope is not backed by lively faith.²

¹ Anon, "John Chinaman," *The California Songster* (San Francisco: Appleton, 1855). Retrieved from: <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/history/baker/w3630/edit/chinpoem.html>

² Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), pp. 92-93.

In the song, “John Chinaman” also eats “rats and puppies.” This sketchy image of a strange and aloof Chinese man (supposedly from the perspective of white workers) was completely different from the manner in which many employers in the construction and mining industries described Chinese workers, seeing them as reliable and hardworking.

The “Verminasation” of the Chinese

After the American Civil War, Chinese labourers, who were considered obedient, docile, and “cheap”, began to be recruited by plantation owners and employers in the Reconstruction South to replace newly-freed and wage-demanding African American workers.³ One plantation owner’s wife asserted that “give us five million Chinese labourers in the valley of the Mississippi and we can furnish the world with cotton and teach the negro his proper place.”⁴ In July 1869, The Mississippi Valley Immigration Labor Company was founded (following a convention of two hundred delegates from Tennessee, Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, Kentucky, Missouri, and California) to recruit labour directly from China.⁵ With the implementation of the Burlingame Treaty in 1868 and American capitalists’ recruitment strategies, the percentage of Chinese workers in the American labour market was increasing, but so also was the resentment towards the Chinese from the lower-class white population. It seems clear that the hostility to Chinese immigrants that was displayed in this period was essentially created by conflict within the working class rather than being simply a product of racial intolerance. Wealthy white businessmen praised and hired the Chinese because they wanted cheap labour, which in turn provoked white working-class resentment of the Chinese as unfair competitors in the workforce.

³ John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 172.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Both capitalist employers and anti-Chinese nativists constructed a general view of the Chinese that fitted their own preconceptions and purposes. Yet the critical view seemed to prevail. The image of a deceitful and odd-looking John Chinaman remained in the public memory, being referred to and built on further in many catchy folk songs and nursery rhymes. Labour activist Robert W. Hume's poem "John Chinaman" (1869), for example, demonstrated white workers' unsettling anxieties about the Chinese's arrival:

You Sturdy tiller of the soil,
 Prepare to leave full soon;
 For when John Chinaman come in
 You'll find there is not room.
 Like an Egyptian locus plague,
 Or like an eastern blight,
 He'll swarm you out of all your fields,
 And seize them as his right.
 Let the mechanics pack his traps,
 And ready make to flit;
 He cannot live on rats and mice,
 And so he needs must quit.

At the full cost of blood war,
 We've garnered in a race;
 One set of serfs of late we've freed,
 Another takes its place.
 Come friends, we'll have to leave this land
 To nobles and to slaves;
 For, if John Chinaman come in,
 For us—there's only graves.⁶

⁶ Ibid., p. 174.

Hume's poem explicitly displays the domestic labour force's concern about the Chinese taking local jobs after the adoption of the Burlingame Treaty of 1868, suggesting they are a replacement underclass ("serfs") for African American slaves. Seemingly aimed specifically at farmers, the poem suggests that John Chinaman – the personification of China – will take over the land like a biblical plague of locusts in Egypt. It is worth noting here that comparing the Chinese to pests or diseases was a common metaphor in American media during the 1860s and 70s. For example, a cartoon by George F. Keller called "Uncle Sam's Farm in Danger", published on *The San Francisco Illustrated Wasp* in 1878, shows a great famine arriving on Uncle Sam's farm, and the cause of the famine is a huge swarm of locusts caricatured with vicious Chinese men's faces. Uncle Sam and his helper wave "House Committee's Report" and "Pacific Coast Press" in their hands trying to stop the arrival of the yellow invaders. However, their efforts seem ineffective as they are powerless compared to the Chinese locusts, who are enormous in size and an overwhelming horde in terms of numbers.

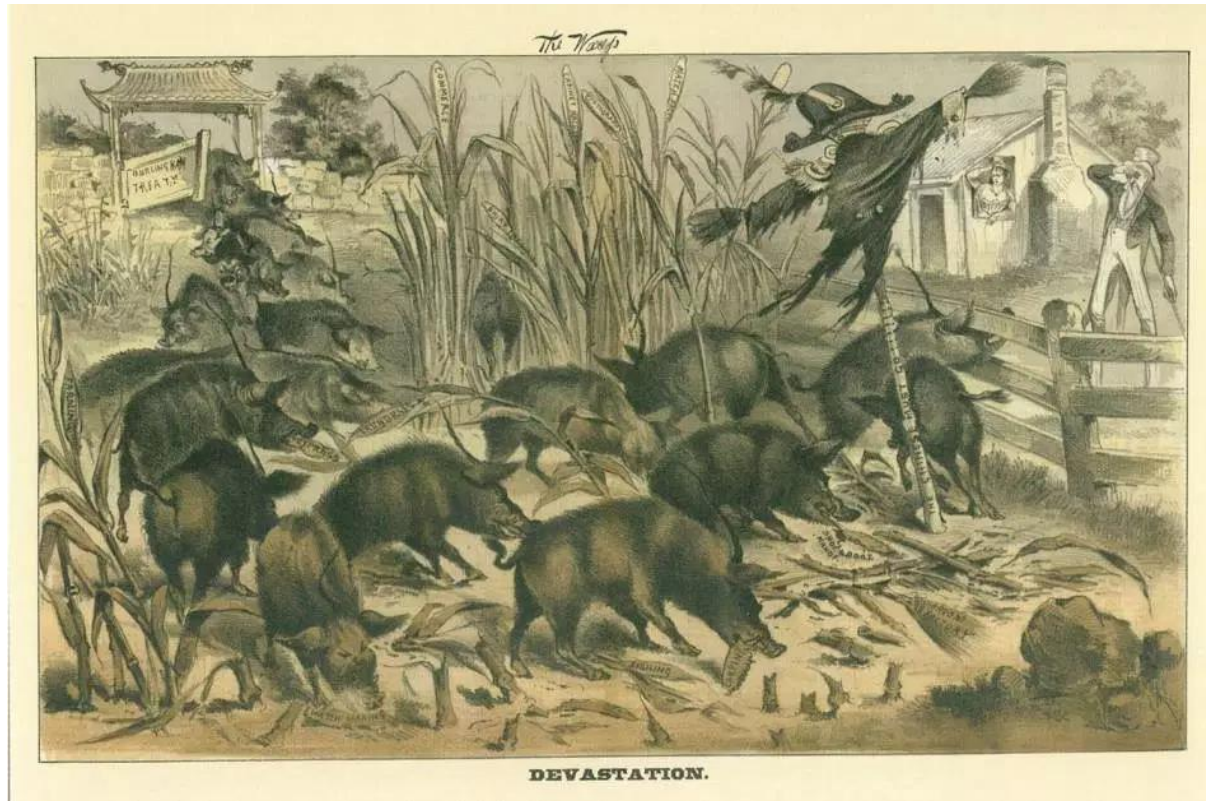


(Figure 1.1: George F. Keller, “Uncle Sam’s Farm in Danger”, 1878)⁷

Another Keller cartoon “Devastation” (1880) also dehumanises the Chinese while blaming the Burlingame Treaty for opening America’s doors to China. The drawing presents a horde of swine with long queues on their head entering Uncle Sam’s corn field from a Chinese-architecturally-styled gateway labelled “Burlingame Treaty.” The hairy boars devastate the field by devouring everything in sight, and the cornstalks they swallow represent various American industries, including “commerce”, “farming”, “shirt factory”, and “shoe and boot market”. A scarecrow in an army suit on a pole labelled “The Chinese Must Go!!” (which is said to represent Denis Kearney—the leader of the Workingmen’s Party) seems ineffectually attempting to scare the gluttonous swine away. Similar to “Uncle Sam’s

⁷ George F. Keller, “Uncle Sam’s Farm in Danger,” *The Wasp*, (9 March 1878). Retrieved from: <https://thomasnastcartoons.com/2014/02/14/uncle-sams-farm-in-danger-9-march-1878/>

Farm in Danger”, Columbia and Uncle Sam are also shown smaller in size in comparison to the invading pigs, which implies their weakness and inability to save their country.



(Figure 1.2: George F. Keller, “Devastation”, 1880)⁸

Famous caricaturist Joseph Keppler was the author of many well-known satirical political cartoons, including the antitrust piece “The Bosses of the Senate” (1889). In his cartoon “The Chinese Invasion” (1880), he depicted a horde of rats jumping off a sinking ship entitled California and swimming towards Manhattan Island. The rats, while heading for Manhattan, turn into Chinese men, and the rat tails transform into men’s queues. In Manhattan, Columbia is sitting on a book titled “Law”, handing out lifebuoys (labelled

⁸ George F. Keller, “Devastation,” *The Wasp*, (2 October 1880). Retrieved from: <https://thomasnastcartoons.com/category/the-san-francisco-illustrated-wasp/george-frederick-keller/>

(Figure 1.3: Joseph Keppler, “The Chinese Invasion”, *Puck*, 12 March 1880)¹¹

The fact that the Chinese were compared to rats in “The Chinese Invasion” was, according to Tchen, a common derogatory presentation at the time, and it could be traced back decades before such caricatures were created. Ever since the 1840s, many children’s books and nursery rhymes claimed that the Chinese ate rats and puppies. For example, a picture in *The Child’s Second Book of History* (1840) shows a Chinese man selling rats, mice and puppies for a living. The lyrics in folk songs also indicated such an association: for example, “Chink, Chink, Chinaman, eats dead rats; Eats them up like gingersnaps” and the line “I thought of rats and puppies, John, you’d eaten your last fill” in the aforementioned “John Chinaman” song all suggested that the Chinese were involved with (eating or selling) rats.¹² In 1850, sixty-two American upper-grade students were asked what they knew about China. Many of them mentioned that it was the country where tea came from, five of them believed that Chinese people were “odd” or “peculiar” in one way or another, four believed that they were uncivilised, two mentioned opium smoking and chewing, and two claimed that the Chinese lived on rats and other vermin.¹³ These answers suggest that American school children had been taught what to think about the Chinese by the 1850s. They also reflect the widespread impression on the part of many Americans that the Chinese were strange, barbaric, and even inhuman. Famous artists and authors in the late nineteenth century, who grew up in the social environment that nourished such prejudice, perhaps inevitably reflected such bias in their own work.

The Sympathetic Images of China and the Chinese in Cartoon

¹¹ Ibid., p. 215.

¹² Ibid., pp. 264-65.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 156-57, 265.

In every era, however, there are people who hold somewhat different views on various social and political issues than the majority. There were, too, artists and writers who had a rather liberal and pro-Chinese outlook, pushing for equal treatment of the Chinese. Thomas Nast, for example, was a radical Republican caricaturist who claimed he advocated equal rights for all races (though he expressed strong anti-Irish views in his cartoons). Many of his drawings demonstrated sympathetic feelings toward African Americans during the Reconstruction Era and compassion for the Chinese during the 1870s and 1880s. In his cartoon “The Youngest Introducing the Oldest” (1868), Nast depicted Columbia as a welcoming hostess introducing a dignified Chinese man (in a Manchurian officer’s robe and carrying a fan in his hand) to European leaders. The Chinese man is portrayed with reasonable authenticity in terms of real Manchurian officers: his head is not intentionally distorted and his queue is not overly emphasised as it was in many other contemporary caricatures. Anson Burlingame is presented sitting behind “John Confucius,” implying the influence of the Burlingame Treaty (which was introduced in the same year) in facilitating this meeting. Out of respect, all the European leaders take off their hats and politely bow to the Chinese with gentle smiles. Only the Pope anxiously peeks at the heathen Chinese man from behind a pillar. This drawing depicts China as an equal to western countries and, perhaps, expresses Nast’s belief that China should/would be treated equally on the world stage.



(Figure 1.4: Thomas Nast, “The Youngest Introducing the Oldest”, *Harper’s Weekly*, 1868)¹⁴

In one of his most important drawings, “The Chinese Question” (1871), Nast portrayed Columbia protecting “John Chinaman”, who sits on the ground in sorrow and huddles against a wall full of racist statements about the Chinese, describing them as “coolie, slave, pauper, rat-eater” and alleging that “they are dishonest, vicious, immoral, heathenish”. Columbia looks fiercely at the mob behind the wall and states “Hands off, gentlemen! America means fair play for all men.” The leader of the mob, according to Tchen, “is a typical Nast’s anti-Irish caricature,” who waves a billy club in one hand and holds a rock in another. On a paper trampled on the ground, it reads “Crimes and drunkenness/Riots by ‘pure white’ strikers/Europeans are the bulk of our ‘American’ pauperism.” This drawing depicts a victimised Chinese labourer chased by the crowd which has just destroyed the “colored”

¹⁴ Thomas Nast, “The Youngest Introducing the Oldest,” *Harper’s Weekly* (18 July 1868). Retrieved from: <https://thomasnastcartoons.com/2014/02/13/the-youngest-introduces-the-oldest/>

orphan asylum and lynched African Americans in the New York City Draft Riots of 1863, indicating the unfair treatments the non-white population—the Chinese and African Americans in particular—received from the Irish in New York.¹⁵ Nast's political stance as a radical Republican – massively opposed to the predominantly Irish Democratic machine (Tammany Hall) running New York City – is straightforwardly articulated in the caricature.



(Figure 1.5: “The Chinese Question”, *Harper’s Weekly*, 1871)¹⁶

¹⁵ Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown*, p. 205.

¹⁶ Thomas Nast, “The Chinese Question,” *Harper’s Weekly* (18 February 1871). Retrieved from: <https://thomasnastcartoons.com/2016/02/13/the-chinese-question/>

“The Heathen Chinee”

Besides these simplistic delineations of the Chinese as being either good or bad, a relatively multifaceted “Chinese” character also emerged in the literary world. A poem “The Heathen Chinee” (originally “Plain Language from Truthful James,” 1870) by Bret Harte built on the one-dimensional image of “John Chinaman” and endowed him with some sneaky characteristics. The poem tells the story of two white Americans (Bill Nye and the narrator, James) who play a card game with a Chinese man—Ah Sin, whose smile is “pensive and childlike” and who pretends not to understand the rules of the game. Nye and James intend to make some quick money by taking advantages of the unknowing Chinese, who, it turns out, is not only an expert gambler but also a proficient cheater—he stocks twenty-four decks of cards in his big sleeves to fool the white men. Nye and James look at each other in the end and say "Can this be? We are ruined by Chinese cheap labor". The poem ends with:

Which is why I remark,
And my language is plain,
That for ways that are dark,
And for tricks that are vain,
The heathen Chinee is peculiar.¹⁷

Harte insisted “The heathen Chinee” was a satiric attack on racial prejudices in the US, and his claim is perhaps credible in terms of the context of his own life. As early as 1863, Harte had condemned a campaign calling for the restriction of Chinese immigration and described the Chinese themselves as “generally honest, faithful, simple, and painstaking.” He also predicted, in an article in the *Springfield Republican* in 1867, that the Chinese would

¹⁷ Bret Harte, “The Heathen Chinee” (“Plain Language from Truthful James”), *The Overland Monthly* (September 1870), pp. 33-35. Retrieved from: <http://twain.lib.virginia.edu/roughingit/map/chiharte.html>

“eventually supplant Bridget and Patrick [i.e. the Irish] in menial occupations.”¹⁸ In one story he wrote, “Wan Lee, the Pagan” (1876), Chinese character Wan Lee, though he commits petty crimes, is a loyal servant who, in the end, is stoned to death by a group of Christian schoolchildren. The cruel killing of Wan Lee, according to Hsin-yun Ou, is a cautionary tale concerning “American religious hypocrisy”.¹⁹ Whatever Harte’s own intentions in writing “The Heathen Chineese” was, however, the poem became popular primarily through its being read as an anti-Chinese/exclusionist message. The poem was an immediate sensation after its original publication and was reprinted in many newspapers and magazines across the country. “Heathen Chineese” and “Ah Sin” became new popular references to Chinese immigrants in literature and illustrations spread nation-wide because of the massive popularity of Harte’s poem. To many contemporary readers, the character Ah Sin was a vivid demonstration of the “yellow peril” – an economic threat – to a white underclass population that was being cheated and driven out from the labour market by the Chinese in 1870s America.²⁰

Many caricatures surrounding Ah Sin were created to encourage strong antipathies toward the Chinese with their aggressive and violent contents. One of Joseph Hull’s illustrations, for example, shows an Irish cardplayer kicking a Chinese in the stomach while waving a card table towards him. In another drawing by Hull, a mob is violently beating Ah Sin up near a card table. Artist Sol Eytinge also depicted a vulgar white man about to punch Ah Sin with his fist while pulling his queue with his other hand. Even Nast, a supposed pro-Chinese caricaturist, exploited the popularity of this Chinese character in his drawing “Ah Sin Was His Name.” Nast depicted an evilly-grinning Chinese man in Manchurian clothes sitting

¹⁸ Gary Scharnhorst, “Ways That Are Dark: Appropriations of Bret Harte’s ‘Plain Language from Truthful James’”, *Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, December 1996), pp. 378-79.

¹⁹ Hsin-yun Ou, “The Chinese Stereotypical Signification in ‘Ah Sin’”, *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 46, no. (December 2013), p. 155.

²⁰ Scharnhorst, “Ways That Are Dark,” pp. 378-79.

in China, happily awaiting the arrival of the “anti-Chinese Bill” brought by “Kearney’s Equal Rights.” The cunning Chinese man states: “that is just what I have been longing for” because, apparently, it allows him reciprocally to raise up the signs “No Foreign Devils Wanted” and “American Produce Market Closed.” Although Nast’s drawing called attention to the potential harmful repercussion of the anti-Chinese bills in the US, it did so by exploiting the contemporary stereotype of the Chinese as being deceptive and tricky people who, presumably, deserved (violent) punishment.



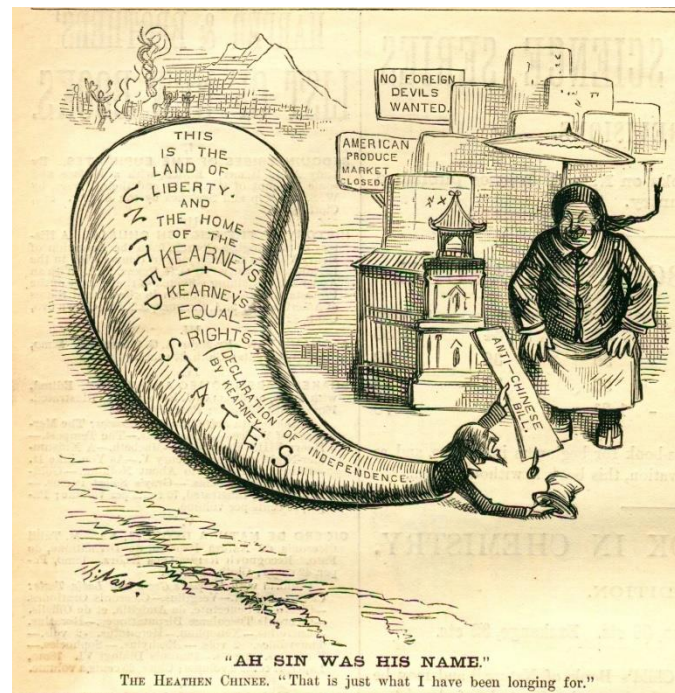
(Figure 1.6: Joseph Hall, “The Heathen Chineee”, 1870)²¹



(Figure 1.7: Sol Eytinge, “The Heathen Chineee” [1871])²²

²¹ Joseph Hall, “The Heathen Chineee” (Chicago: Western News Co., 1870), see Scharnhorst, “Ways That Are Dark”, p. 382.

²² Sol Eytinge, “The Heathen Chineee” (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1871), see Scharnhorst, “Ways That Are Dark”, p. 389.



(Figure 1.8: Thomas Nast, "Ah Sin Was His Name", *Harper's Weekly*, 1879)²³

Harte, on the other hand, though insisting that the press generally distorted his true intention to satirise American prejudice, very much enjoyed the popularity of his poem with the general public, and he was more than willing to accommodate the demands of the literary marketplace to make money. In the summer of 1876, he wrote a play called *Two Men of Sandy Bar* which contained a Chinese laundryman character – Hop Sing (played by Charles Parsloe in yellow-face make-up) – who appears to have been the first "Chinaman" on stage in New York. Although Hop Sing only appears for a few minutes in the entire play – and purely for comic effect – he became a much-applauded character.²⁴ Seeing critics' recognition of this "stage Chinaman" and even encouragement for a separate play specifically around Hop Sing, Harte understood it as people's general appreciation and interest in seeing Chinese characters

²³ Thomas Nast, "Ah Sin Was His Name," *Harper's Weekly* (1879). Retrieved from: <https://thomasnastcartoons.com/2014/02/03/ah-sin-was-his-name-8-march-1879/>

²⁴ Scharnhorst, "Ways That Are Dark", p. 389; The stereotype was surprisingly enduring. Hop Sing was the name of the Chinese cook in the hugely popular American television show *Bonanza* (1959-1973)

on stage, so he subsequently thought of the most popular Chinese character he had created—in September 1876, Harte approached Mark Twain suggesting they collaborate on a play centring on the character Ah Sin from his acclaimed poem “The Heathen Chinee.”²⁵

Mark Twain himself is known to have shown compassion about the sufferings of Chinese people both in China and the United States. In his article “John Chinaman in New York,” he described a Chinese man sitting in front of an American tea store “acting in the capacity of a sign,” deliberately being stared at by the people passing by. Sympathies for the inhuman treatment of the Chinese in New York are deftly expressed through Twain’s perceptive reflection and shrewd language in the article:

Is it not a shame that we who prate so much about civilization and humanity are content to degrade a fellow-being to such an office as this? ... Men calling themselves the superior race, the race of culture and of gentle blood, scanned his quaint Chinese hat, with peaked roof and ball on top; and his long queue dangling down his back; his short silken blouse, curiously frogged and figured (and, like the rest of his raiment, rusty, dilapidated, and awkwardly put on); his blue cotton, tight-legged pants tied close around the ankles, and his clumsy, blunt-toed shoes with thick cork soles; and having so scanned him from head to foot, cracked some unseemly joke about his outlandish attire or his melancholy face, and passed on. In my heart I pitied the friendless Mongol.²⁶

In his satirical article “Disgraceful Prosecution of a Boy,” Twain used the testimony of a boy, arrested for stoning a Chinese man, to reveal the mistreatments of Chinese immigrants in California, the racist message inculcated into children indoctrinated to believe that “a Chinaman has no rights that any man is bound to respect” and, ultimately, the cruelty and

²⁵ Ou, “The Chinese Stereotypical Signification in ‘Ah Sin’”, p. 151.

²⁶ Mark Twain, “John Chinaman in New York,” *The California Farmer* (6 November 1870).

hypocrisy hidden in white civilisation.²⁷ In “Goldsmith’s Friend Abroad Again,” Twain created a series of fictional letters written by a Chinese labourer to his friend in China to foreground the “Chinaman’s” kindness, naivety, and wishful thinking about the US, while contrasting it pointedly with the brutal treatments he receives from white Americans after his arrival in the country.²⁸

Twain, moreover, was particularly cynical about contemporary American missionary projects in China. According to Gordon H. Chang, Twain called the Boxers the “traduced patriots” and found the missionaries who called for vengeance shameful.²⁹ In his sarcastic essay “To the Person Sitting in Darkness,” Twain condemned warfare waged for the purpose of bringing the Christian Gospel to the uncivilised natives and indemnities required by the US and European countries. He asked: “...shall we go on conferring our Civilization upon the peoples that sit in darkness, or shall we give those poor things a rest?”³⁰ In “The United States of Lyncherdom”, an article criticising lynching in America, Twain even wrote:

Let us import American missionaries from China, and send them into the lynching field ... The Chinese are universally conceded to be excellent people, honest, honorable, industrious, trustworthy, kind-hearted, and all that—leave them alone, they are plenty good enough just as they are; and besides, almost every convert runs a risk of catching our civilization. We ought to be careful. We ought to think twice before we encourage a risk like that; for, once civilized, China can never be uncivilized again.³¹

²⁷ Chris Kanellakou, “Make Twain and the Chinese,” *Mark Twain Journal* (Spring 1963), p. 8.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

²⁹ Chang, *Fateful Ties*, p. 107.

³⁰ Mark Twain, “To the Person sitting in Darkness,” *The North American Review* (February 1901), p. 164.

³¹ Mark Twain, “The United States of Lyncherdom” (1901). Retrieved from: <https://www-cambridge-org.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/core/journals/prospects/article/ii-the-united-states-of-lyncherdom/2C02B2760694DA93C97CCBDFFEAB49F3>

When Harte approached Twain in 1876 for the play about Ah Sin, the two humourists, who held very similar views on the Chinese, were confident of the financial success of such a collaboration (they aimed to “divide the swag”—as Twain sanguinely wrote to William Dean Howells while talking about Harte’s proposal).³² The play was finalised with the title *Ah Sin*, and it challenged, to certain extent, the contemporary stereotype of Chinese labourers. The story is set in a mining area in San Francisco, revolving around the murder of Bill Plunkette (Ah Sin’s friend) by the villain Broderick, who later blames York (Ah Sin’s boss) for committing the crime. Ah Sin (Charles Parsloe) finds Broderick’s blood-stained jacket by accident, and he hides the evidence for the murderer in exchange for a share in the mine. Just before York is executed because of the false accusation, however, Ah Sin brings out the evidence (which he has lied about destroying), undercuts all the charges against York, and incriminates the real murderer: Broderick.³³ Although the character Ah Sin possesses some moral flaws, he is the hero of the entire story, a man who outmanoeuvres all the white characters. In contrast to the poker game described in the original poem, the play presents Broderick cheating Plunkette instead, and Ah Sin only intervenes in the game in favour of his friend. This plot might or might not be an intentional arrangement to imply that the economic crisis in the late nineteenth century was a problem essentially occurring within white society, and the Chinese population in the US was only involved incidentally. According to Ou, the playwrights used the outsider Ah Sin’s viewpoint to criticise the cruelty of Euro-American society and Americans’ love affair with money during the so-called “Gilded Age.”³⁴

Interestingly, however, some of Ah Sin’s lines in the play reflect Chinese men’s lives in American society in real life. For example, Ah Sin hopes to “catchee plenty goldee, mally

³² Ou, “The Chinese Stereotypical Signification in ‘Ah Sin’”, p. 151.

³³ Ibid., p. 148.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 150-52.

Illy girl, go back to China” is an indication of the “credit system” the Chinese cheap labourers lived under—they were usually paid to come to the US and work off their debts in order to go back China. Culturally, the play was influential because the way in which Ah Sin pronounces English words (pidgin English spoken by the actor), yellow-face performances, and Parsloe’s comic imitation of Chinese men (in both *Two Men of Sandy Bar* and *Ah Sin*) with clumsy and laughable body movements altogether created an archetype for the theatrical construction of Chinese people that would also impact the filmic representation of the Chinese in the coming century.



(Figure 1.9: Charles T. Parsloe as Ah Sin, 1877)³⁵

It was “progressive,” indeed, of Harte and Twain to delineate Ah Sin in a way that

³⁵ Charles T. Parsloe as Ah Sin in 1877, picture retrieved from: <http://twain.lib.virginia.edu/onstage/playscripts/ahsinhp7.html>

challenged existing Chinese stereotypes but, unfortunately for the two authors, the play was a box office failure. Critics and audiences accepted the comical aspects of Ah Sin (his overly exaggerated accent, clumsy movements, and odd appearances were, for example, praised in reviews). Yet the white theatre-going public appear to have detested the fact that Ah Sin manipulated, outsmarted, and was even more righteous than white Americans. As Ou remarks “they (the public) could enjoy a miserably clownish Chinese man, but not a triumphantly dominant one.”³⁶ It was difficult, even for literary giants such as Harte and Twain, to alter people’s prejudice toward the Chinese during the peak of anti-Chinese sentiment in the 1870s.

Although some seemingly positive images of the Chinese were created by some intellectuals, the Chinese figures that could be accepted and perpetuated by the general public were still predominantly hostile ones. Racism limited the potential for a sympathetic and positive Chinese image to develop. In Harte’s late years, he still made “‘half humorous, half earnest protest against’ the way the poem (‘The Heathen Chinee’) was cited in the press.”³⁷ But no matter what he proclaimed, his own poem was largely remembered as an anti-Chinese message. “The Heathen Chinee” gained another burst of popularity after the introduction of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 and was reprinted in at least eight anthologies between 1887 and 1902 (the year when Harte died). The Democratic candidate for Vice-President, Allen Thurman, even quoted it during his campaign in 1888 to show his aversion to the Chinese.³⁸

In addition to more general American anti-Chinese sentiment, Irish New Yorkers played a crucial part in emphasising the Chinese’s marginalised role in American culture. There was a racially charged social hierarchy pre-existing in the US in the nineteenth century – in

³⁶ Ou, “The Chinese Stereotypical Signification in ‘Ah Sin’”, p. 155.

³⁷ Scharnhorst, “Ways That Are Dark,” p. 387.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 394-95.

general, Irish Catholics were discriminated against by Protestant Anglo-Americans, though they were privileged over African Americans. Ever since the Chinese entered the American labour market in the mid-nineteenth century, they had become competitors to Irish labourers, and this competitive relationship was also reflected in the existing racial hierarchy. Although white people were generally privileged over the non-white population, some people (represented by radical Republicans including Thomas Nast) believed that the subservient Chinese were “safer” than the Irish, and thereafter should be ranked higher; others (such as Joseph Keppler) believed the two were both at the bottom level fighting each other. In order to defuse the prejudice against them, Tchen argues, the Irish community appealed to a broadened pan-European Anglo-American identity, which constructed non-white racial groups (such as African Americans and the Chinese) in a lower position altogether as “others” who were physically distinguished from the Caucasians.³⁹

Some theatrical Chinese characters created by Irish writers directly expressed such an idea. For example, Edward Harrigan’s Hog Eye in *Mulligan Guard Chowder* (1879) was a dishonest, feminised, and laughable Chinese laundryman, created solely to entertain white male audiences.⁴⁰ By contrast, during this period, Chinese immigrants were smaller in number, disadvantaged in language and education, and marginalised in society in general. Such conditions discouraged the Chinese population’s engagement with and ability to shape the American popular culture. There were no Chinese performers on stage, no Chinese writers rebutting the fixed stereotypes, nor was there a solid Chinese audience base which a fairer portrayal of their people might have catered to.⁴¹ The early cultural construction of the Chinese in the United States, thereafter, was a one-dimensional story told solely by white intellectuals, who came from various backgrounds with different political purposes.

³⁹ Tchen, *New York before Chinatown*, p. 221.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 219-20.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 221.

In addition to the overtly prejudiced artists and writers, even the most pro-Chinese authors do not appear to have genuinely believed that the Chinese were racial equals to the white population. In a Nast's cartoon "The Martyrdom of St. Crispin," he presents two Chinese men, both carrying a sabre labelled "Cheap Labor" on the blade, sneaking behind St. Crispin (the patron saint of leather workers), who is unaware of the fact that he is about to be slain and replaced by cheap Chinese labour. Other Nast drawings, for example, "Pacific Chivalry" and "The New Comet – A Phenomenon Now Visible in All Parts of the US," though they do not attack the Chinese deliberately, portray them with long faces and ridicule their queues in a way not much different from Keller and Keppler's anti-Chinese caricatures. Moreover, Nast's use of Ah Sin to warn the American public about China's potential revenge on the anti-Chinese bill reveals his awareness of the Chinese as both victims and stereotypes in American society, and Nast took advantage of both to make his own political stances more convincing to his audience. "Just as abolitionists were not necessarily antiracist and were sometimes even Negrophobic," Tchen remarks, "Nast's stand on formal equal rights did not mean that he thought Chinese were his racial equals."⁴²

Ironically enough, Twain also did not have much personal affection towards the Chinese themselves. According to his biographer Albert B. Paine, when Twain worked for San Francisco's *The Morning Call*, he enjoyed going to the block where the Chinese lived and teasing them by throwing beer bottles on their tin roofs. He loved to do this prank repeatedly with his friend Steve Gillis: they called it their "Sunday amusement."⁴³ Philip S. Foner also quotes Twain as once saying that "...I am not fond of Chinamen, but I am still less fond of seeing them wronged and abused."⁴⁴ These artists and literary giants were, undoubtedly,

⁴² Ibid., p. 211.

⁴³ Kanellakou, "Make Twain and the Chinese," p.7, originally in Albert Bigelow Paine's *Mark Twain: A Biography* (North Charleston: Createspace: 1912), I, pp. 255-56.

⁴⁴ Ibid., originally in Philip S. Foner's *Mark Twain: Social Critic* (New York: International Publishers, 1958), p. 183.

pioneers in their era and had done much for minority groups; however, despite their apparent progressiveness, they, too, were limited by the racial prejudices of their time.



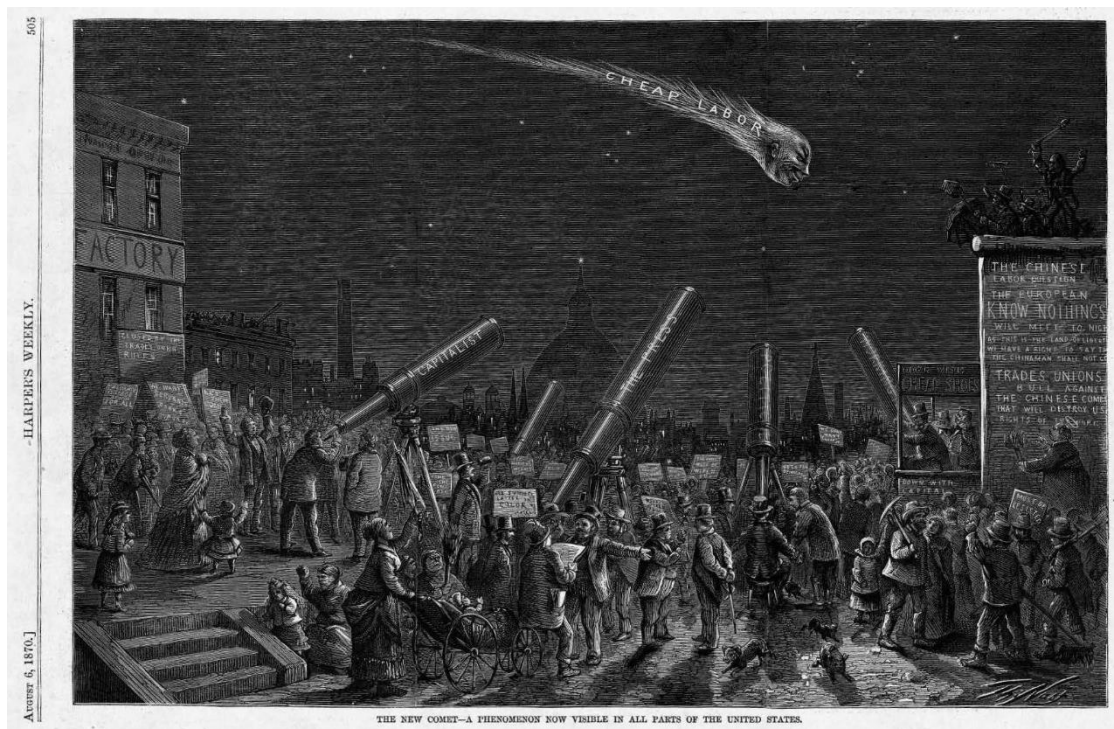
(Figure 1.10: Thomas Nast, “The Martyrdom of St. Crispin”, 1870)⁴⁵



(Figure 1.11: Thomas Nast, “Pacific Chivalry”, 1869)⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Thomas Nast, “The Martyrdom of St. Crispin,” *Harper’s Weekly* (16 July 1870). Retrieved from: <https://thomasnastcartoons.com/2014/02/27/martyrdom-st-crispin/>

⁴⁶ Thomas Nast, “Pacific Chivalry,” *Harper’s Weekly* (7 August 1869). Retrieved from: <https://thomasnastcartoons.com/2014/02/25/pacific-chivalry-7/>



(Figure 1.12: Thomas Nast, “The New Comet—A phenomenon Now Visible in All Parts of the United States”, 1870)⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Thomas Nast, “The New Comet—A phenomenon Now Visible in All Parts of the United States,” *Harper’s Weekly* (8 June 1870). Retrieved from: <https://thomasnastcartoons.com/2014/04/01/the-new-comet-a-phenomenon-now-visible-in-all-parts-of-the-us-6-august-1870/>

Chapter Two: Early American Films about China and Their Links to the Previous Century

The majority of Hollywood's 1910s and 20s productions dealing with China were set in the last several decades of the Qing dynasty (1840-1912), when interactions between China and the West were increasing, and centred on exotic Manchurian characters. During the period before the demise of China's dynastic system, the inept and insolvent Qing government faced western imperialistic encroachment on China, with that country losing its sovereignty and territorial integrity. In motion pictures, Chinese people were often represented in line with this historical background, being portrayed as the victims of westerners' arbitrary behaviour in China. In some cases, angry Chinese father figures are shown seeking revenge in extreme ways for the damage caused by the West. This type of narrative reflected both a consciousness on the part of Americans of the 1910s and 20s of the western imperialistic activities taking place in the Far East and an anxiety about potential retaliations initiated by the East against the West, as expressed for example in the Boxer Rebellion in China (1899-1901).

A number of very popular feature films about China produced in this period expressed at least to some extent these concerns. They included, for example, *The Forbidden City* (1918), *Broken Blossoms* (1919), *The Toll of the Sea* (1922), *Mr. Wu* (1927) and *The Mysterious Fu Manchu* (1929).¹ The visual presentations of the Chinese characters (their costumes, facial expressions, and bodily movements) in these films are largely influenced by the depictions of the Chinese in caricatures and stage plays produced in the late nineteenth century. The

¹ Sidney Franklin, *The Forbidden City* (Norma Talmadge Film Corporation, 1918); D. W. Griffith, *Broken Blossoms* (United Artists, 1919); Tom Forman, *Shadows* (B.P. Schulberg Productions, 1922); Chester M. Franklin, *The Toll of the Sea* (Technicolor, 1922); William Nigh, *Mr. Wu* (MGM, 1927); Rowland V. Lee, *The Mysterious Fu Manchu* (Paramount Pictures, 1929).

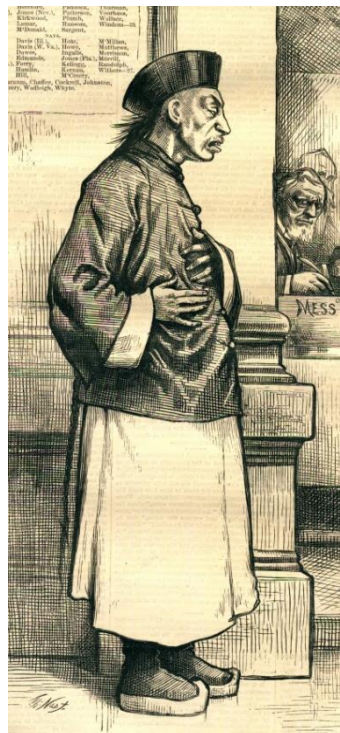
Manchurian officials (the villains) in *The Forbidden City*, for instance, look almost identical to the “John Chinaman” figure in some of Thomas Nast’s portrayals of the Chinese, such as “A Matter of Taste” (1879) and “‘The Nigger Must Go’ And ‘The Chinese Must Go’” (1879). The romanticised Chinese character Cheng Huan in *Broken Blossoms* (in certain scenes), on the other hand, visually resembles some sympathetic presentations in Nast’s portrayals, for example, the victimised Chinese who is seen under the protection of Columbia (a female-version personification of the United States) in “The Chinese Question.”



(Figure 2.1: Film *The Forbidden City* [1918])



(Figure 2.2: From “‘The Nigger Must Go’ And ‘The Chinese Must Go’” by Thomas Nast, 1879)²

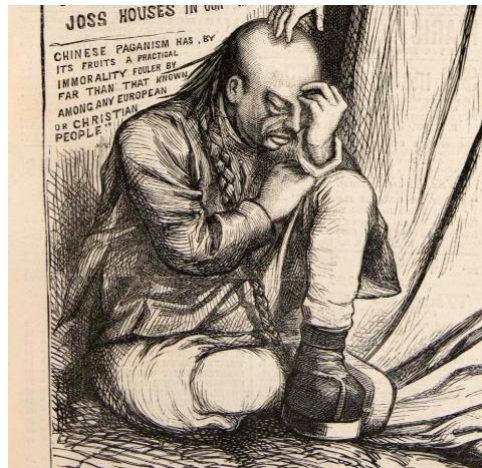


² Thomas Nast, “‘The Nigger Must Go’ And ‘The Chinese Must Go’”, *Harper’s Weekly* (13 September 1879). Retrieved from: <https://thomasnastcartoons.com/2014/04/01/the-nigger-must-go-and-the-chinese-must-go/>

(Figure 2.3: From “A Matter of Taste” by Thomas Nast, 1879)³



(Figure 2.4: Cheng Huan in *Broken Blossoms*)



(Figure 2.5: The Chinese man in “The Chinese Question” by Nast)

It is worth emphasising that the early personifications of Chinese in American popular culture were mostly male figures. Chinese women, due to the fact that they were even more

³ Thomas Nast, “A Matter of Taste,” *Harper’s Weekly*, (15 March 1879). Retrieved from: <https://thomasnastcartoons.com/2014/04/01/a-matter-of-taste-15-march-1879/>

strictly excluded from the US than the men since the Page Act of 1875, were less visible and much less represented in early films than Chinese men. Once Chinese female characters did begin to make an appearance on film in the 1910s, they frequently became (whether presented sympathetically or unsympathetically) the romantic interest of white male characters. The dalliance with racial taboos seemed to make this kind of interracial relationship more exciting for white audiences to watch, even though the storylines often ended tragically with trouble for – or even the sacrificial death of – the Chinese woman as a punishment for her involvement in miscegenation. As critic Antony Anderson put it in his review of *The Forbidden City* in 1918: “[Rudyard] Kipling once made the broad declaration that East and West shall never meet. But sometimes they do, nevertheless—and when they do, the devil’s to pay.”⁴

The considerable number of “Chinese” stories circulating in the literary and theatrical worlds provided the fledgling film industry with substantial precedents for producing motion pictures about China and its people. Meanwhile, the Xinhai Revolution in China (1911-12), which overthrew the Manchurian-ruled Qing dynasty, also helped to attract attention the attention of many Americans to China. In October 1910, Sun Yat-Sen’s revolutionary organisation *Tongmenghui* managed to publish its own newspaper *Young China* (a publication mainly circulated in Chinese-American communities) in the United States, and this publication decisively attacked the Manchurian government for its failures.⁵ For example, *Young China Morning Paper* declared in its 19 August 1910 issue that:

The United States has established special laws excluding Chinese labores, which was a non-humanitarian act. Yet that was not enough. There have been increasing strict

⁴ Antony Anderson, “Films: ‘The Forbidden City’; A vivid picture of oriental life at Tally,” *Los Angeles Times* (10 December, 1918).

⁵ Shehong Chen, *Being Chinese, Becoming Chinese American* (Champaign, IL.: University of Illinois Press, 2002), p. 10.

regulations and meticulous fault-finding practices, which intended to wipe out all Chinese from the American continent ... If we Chinese wish to defend ourselves against such discrimination, we must first of all restore our national independence. In order to restore our national independence, we must first restore the Chinese nation. In order to restore the Chinese nation, we must drive the barbarian Manchus back to the Changbai Mountain. In order to get rid of the barbarians, we must first overthrow the present tyrannical, dictatorial, ugly, and corrupt Qing government.⁶

During this time, the Chinese revolutionary nationalists publicised such anti-Manchu messages both at home and abroad. By the end of 1911, according to Shehong Chen, the majority of the Chinese population in the United States had committed to support the revolutionary cause. At the same time, the American public were also informed about China's political upheavals by the American press. From 1910 to 1912, many major American newspapers across the country reported China's anti-Manchu revolution with special attention paid to the safety of foreigners in China. For example, according to *Chicago Daily Tribune* on 13 October 1911:

Yesterday's mutiny in Wu-Chang today has assumed proportions of a general revolution. Bent upon overthrowing the empire and proclaiming China a republic, the anti-Manchu party has rallied to arms and the entire day has been marked by rioting and attacks upon the government troops ...

In fact, one of the most remarkable features of the uprising is this consideration so far shown to all foreigners. Former revolutions have been presaged by demonstrations against European and American businessmen and missionaries, but these now are afforded every protection that the revolutionary leaders can give.⁷

⁶ Chen, *Being Chinese, Becoming Chinese American*, p. 17.

⁷ "Chinese Rebels Plan a Republic: Anti-Manchu Party Seizes More Cities and Kills Nearly 1,000 Soldiers; Get Important Arsenal; Show Great Consideration for Foreigners; Missionaries All Saved," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (13 October 1911).

Other newspapers also reported on the protection foreigners received during the uprising while informing the American public about Sun Yat-Sen's education outside China, his fund-raising tour to the United States in 1910, and the fact that his revolutionary party had gained support from the Chinese population in America.⁸ The American public might not completely comprehend the complexity of China's political and ethnic issues at the time, but many Americans must have acquired some sense of the country's political struggles and the growing anti-Manchu sentiment.

In addition to this, the collection of Chinese art was a growing trend in the United States in the 1910s and 20s (probably encouraged by the passage of a series of laws in Japan to prevent the export of its own national treasures to foreign countries). American art collectors saw the political unrest and instability in China before and after the Revolution of 1911 against the Qing dynasty as an opportunity, perceiving the country as now offering a better source of oriental art than Japan. During this period, a great number of Chinese paintings, pottery, and other art-forms were purchased and transported to the United States. "By the early 1920s," according to Warren I. Cohen, "Chinese masterpieces could be found in all the major American art museums, in Chicago, Cleveland, Kansas City, and St. Louis, as well as in Boston [the Boston Museum of Fine Arts], New York [the Metropolitan Museum of Art], and Washington [the Freer Gallery of Art as part of the Smithsonian Institution]."⁹ Many Americans were taking Chinese art very seriously at this time, and Cohen argues that this craze encouraged the treatment of the Chinese as "real people" in the United States, because "if their art was precious, the product of sophistication, skill, and genius, then as a people they must be capable of sophistication, skill, and genius."¹⁰

⁸ "China Revolt Growing Fast," *New York Times* (13 October, 1911); "Orientals Show Intense Spirit," *Los Angeles Times* (14 October 1911); "China is Riven by Revolution, Throne Totters," *The Atlanta Constitution* (13 October 1911).

⁹ Cohen, *America's Response to China*, pp. 90-91.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 91.



(Figure 2.6: A Chinese-styled film set in *The Forbidden City* [1918])¹¹

¹¹ The picture is published with an article titled *Chinese Stuff* by Frank V. Bruner in an unidentified magazine. Bruner claims that the film's scenario editor, technical director, and art director had done a considerable amount of research on Chinese culture properly to represent China in the film. See the article: <https://web.stanford.edu/~gdegroat/NT/oldreviews/fc.htm>



(Figure 2.7: A photo of Lillian Gish in Chinese gown, taken for *Broken Blossoms* [1919])¹²

¹² Retrieved from: <https://silenthollywood.com/lilliangish.html>



(Figure 2.8: The female protagonist Nang Ping [Renee Adoree] and her maid Loo Song [Anna May Wong] in a Chinese garden set in *Mr. Wu* [1927])¹³

Americans' enthusiasm for Chinese art was also reflected in some of the films produced in the 1910s and 20s – films that deliberately included extravagant Chinese mise-en-scènes to impress movie-goers. In 1927, Grauman's Chinese Theatre (renamed as TCL Chinese Theatre in 2013) was built by showman Sid Grauman, five years after the grand opening of Grauman's Egyptian Theatre. Building theatres of this kind reflected the American public's fascination with and curiosity about exotic Oriental culture. An article from the *Los Angeles Times* in 1927 describes the theatre in this way:

before the spectator enters the theatre itself he must pass through a lovely oriental garden, an enormous elliptical forecourt with forty-foot walls. Here are full grown

¹³ Retrieved from: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/morbius19/10335110836>

cocoa palms, tropical trees and trailing verdure, for it was the custom of the Chinese to bring woodland life into the heart of their cities ... The main auditorium, which seats 2200 on one floor, has been so designed, it is said, to suggest a shrine during the dynasty of Hsia, when the world is very young indeed ... Extending to the side walls are a myriad of panels each presenting some fanciful scene of Chinese antiquity ... The rugs were woven in China after designs prepared to harmonize with the theatre itself.¹⁴



(Figure 2.9: Grauman's Chinese Theatre in 1927)¹⁵

¹⁴ Marquis Busby, "Grauman's Chinese Theater Ready for Opening Night: Cinema Capital Resplendent New Jewel in Theatrical Crown," *Los Angeles Times* (15 May 1927).

¹⁵ Pre-opening street view of Grauman's Chinese Theatre in 1927, photo taken by Burton Frasher, Sr. (1888-1955). Retrieved from: <http://www.graumanschinese.org/tour-1927.html>.



(Figure 2.10: Auditorium from the northwest, 1927)¹⁶

¹⁶ Auditorium from the northwest, 1927. Photo by J. Howard Mott (1888-1937). Retrieved from <http://www.graumanschinese.org/tour-1927.html>.

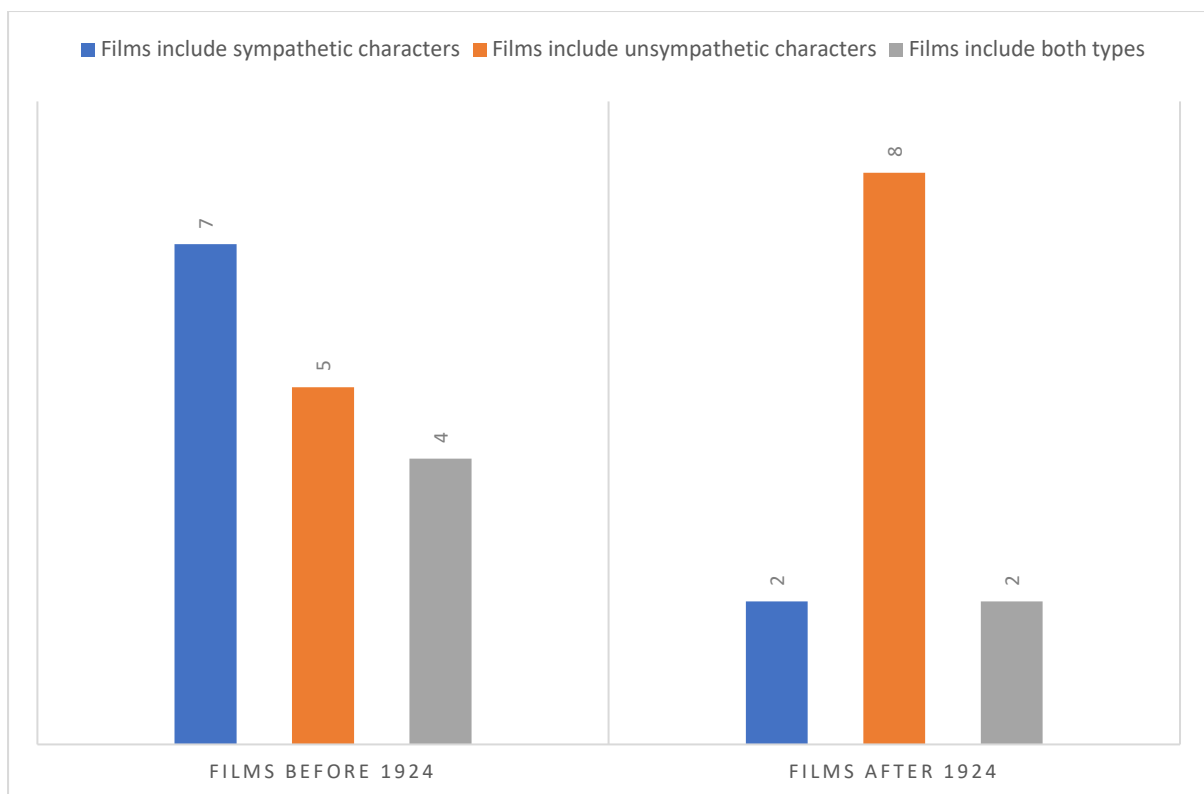


(Figure 2.11: Forecourt with theatre ushering staff, 1927)¹⁷

In the 1910s and 20s (especially before 1924, the year when the Asian Exclusion Act was adopted), many sympathetic Chinese characters were constructed on film. These positive representations of the Chinese and Chinese culture and religion appear to have paralleled the admiration of many Americans for Chinese art, even if they must be balanced against the prevailing popular xenophobia and prejudice against real Chinese people in the United States. Looking at a filmography of sixteen features films about China or centering on Chinese characters produced in Hollywood between 1918 and 1930, the year 1924 was the turning-point for a noticeable increase in the unsympathetic portrayal of Chinese characters. For the

¹⁷ Picture of Grauman's Chinese Theatre ushering staff in 1927, retrieved from: <http://www.graumanschinese.org/tour-1927.html>.

eight films released before 1924, seven foreground sympathetic Chinese characters (several are the “Lotus Flower” type), and five out of eight include some negative representations of the Chinese. In the eight films produced after 1924, on the other hand, all contain unfavourable portrayals of the Chinese, and only two pictures have sympathetic Chinese characters at all.¹⁸ Such drastic change in constructing the cinematic image of Chinese people from the introduction of a stricter immigration law may suggest that Hollywood’s productions were deliberately being made compatible with the Federal Government’s policies and the general public’s attitude in this era.



(Figure 2.12: Chart created based on sixteen films released between 1910s and 1930 [half of them were released up to 1923, and the rest 1924-1930])

¹⁸ The chart is generated based on fourteen feature films from 1918 to 1930: *The Forbidden City* (1918), *Broken Blossoms* (1919), *The Red Lantern* (1919), *The Lightning Raider* (1919), *Mandarin’s Gold* (1919), *Shadows* (1922), *The Toll of the Sea* (1922), *East is West* (1922), *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924), *The Fighting American* (1924), *Tell It to the Marines* (1926), *Mr. Wu* (1927), *Old San Francisco* (1927), *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu* (1929), *The Return of Dr. Fu Manchu* (1930), *East is West* (1930).

D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*, as one of the major films about China in the 1910s and 20s, shows much sympathy toward a Chinese man and his love affair with an English girl, at the same time demonstrating respect for Buddhism. Though Griffith's personal racial views were deeply problematic and his intentions in making the film itself can be questioned, *Broken Blossoms* is regarded by many as an artistic masterpiece of the era in which it was produced.

Broken Blossoms and the Romanticised "John Chinaman"

Before Griffith made *Broken Blossoms* in 1919, his earlier film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) had already proved a highly controversial episode in American film history.¹⁹ In spite of its excellence in visual quality and score, it discriminated against African Americans, fiercely condemned miscegenation, and tried to justify the Ku Klux Klan and its crimes during the Reconstruction era. The film stirred up unprecedented opposition – the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) and the National Urban League both joined the campaign against the *The Birth of a Nation* for its racist content.²⁰ However, Griffith never accepted accusations that he was a racist. In 1919, he produced *Broken Blossoms*, a film based on the story "The Chink and the Child" from the collection *Limehouse Nights*, written by British author Thomas Burke.²¹ In his new movie, Griffith demonstrated great tolerance and respect for an interracial romance between an English girl and a Chinese man, at a time when Chinese immigrants to the United States were experiencing huge social discrimination and hostility in popular culture.²² The film was

¹⁹ D. W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation* (Epoch Producing Corporation, 1915).

²⁰ Melvyn Stokes, "Race, Nationality, and Citizenship: the Case of *The Birth of a Nation*," Cornelis A. Minnen and Sylvia L. Hilton, ed., *Federalism, Citizenship, and Collective Identities in U.S. History* (VU University Press, 2000), p. 117.

²¹ Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril"*, p. 32.

²² Julia Lesage, "Artful Racism and Artful Rape in *Broken Blossoms*," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 26 (1981), pp. 51-55.

praised for its aesthetic quality and was a financial success at the box-office. It also created one of the first sympathetic on-screen “Chinaman” images.

Broken Blossoms begins with an intertitle setting the tone of the whole story: “It is a tale of temple bells, sounding at sunset before the image of Buddha; it is a tale of love and lovers; it is a tale of tears.”²³ The camera then shows a prosperous Chinese coastal city of the late nineteenth century (a locale recreated in the United States). The Chinese that the camera picks out – young girls, children, an old fortune-teller, etc. – look extremely exotic yet, at the same time, civilised and peaceful. They seem in many ways to represent the typical highly-intelligent and civilised Chinese people that medieval explorer Marco Polo had described to the West.²⁴



(Figure 2.13: Chinese girls shown in the beginning of the film)

²³ D. W. Griffith, *Broken Blossoms* (American Artists, 1919).

²⁴ Issacs, *Scratches on Our Minds*, p. 63.



(Figure 2.14: Chinese children)

By contrast, a group of young Caucasian boys (introduced as “sky-larking American sailors”) are then shown indulging themselves with food, tobacco, and alcohol from a food vendor. They later quarrel and fight with each other while gallivanting in the street, showing themselves an inharmonious presence in the peaceful Chinese town. Coming himself from a Methodist background, it was quite common for Griffith to relate people’s misbehaviours to the use of alcohol. By the early 1910s, he had made several films warning people about the dangers of alcohol. Even in *The Birth of a Nation*, he tried to make connections between the tragedies caused by the black characters and their abuse of alcohol.²⁵ It was unusual, however, for Griffith to present white boys misbehaving with booze in their hands while the non-white people – in this case, the Chinese – were sober and courteous. His intention was clearly to ensure that the Chinese were represented favourably and, in doing so, the drunken Westerners inevitably became their evil foil.

Links between alcohol abuse and misconduct can be traced throughout *Broken Blossoms*:

²⁵ Melvyn Stokes, *American History through Hollywood Film: From the Revolution to the 1960s* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 95-96.

for example, the introductory scene of the villain – boxer Battling Burrows (Donald Crisp) – is a medium close-up shot of him pouring alcohol down his throat. In the following sequences involving Battling Burrows, he always has an alcoholic beverage in his hand. Furthermore, after he murders his teenage daughter, the female protagonist Lucy (Lillian Gish), the first thing he does is to go into another room to find a bottle of alcohol. Griffith seems to have been underlining the point that more alcohol inside one's body meant less humanity. And in sharp contrast to this alcoholic and violent Anglo-Saxon lifestyle is the male protagonist of the film, an abstinent Chinese Buddhist missionary-in-reverse – Cheng Huan (film star Richard Barthelmess).

As a missionary-in-reverse about to depart for Britain, Cheng Huan has been induced to believe that he needs to “take the glorious message of peace to the barbarous Anglo-Saxons, sons of turmoil and strife.” After witnessing the “sociable free fight” of the American young men on the street, Cheng Huan has never been more convinced about how much the West needs the great message of the Buddha. The director has set the tone of the film from the very beginning – that the Chinese are a peace-loving and philosophically calm people because of their culture and religion – while suggesting that the Anglo-Saxons are bellicose and capricious. Dreaming about changing the world through religion (like thousands of Christian missionaries in China sent by the West), Cheng Huan leaves for Britain. However, his preaching dream soon falls apart after his arrival in London: he abandons his preaching role and becomes a shopkeeper in working-class Limehouse.

One thing the film makes abundantly clear is the huge environmental difference between the opening shot of the peaceful Chinese city and the degradation of Limehouse. Just before Huan leaves China, a long sequence portrays the routines of Buddhist teaching, religious rituals, and the extravagant decorations of a local temple. In Limehouse, however, we see Huan dwelling in a London gambling house and an opium den with other minorities – the

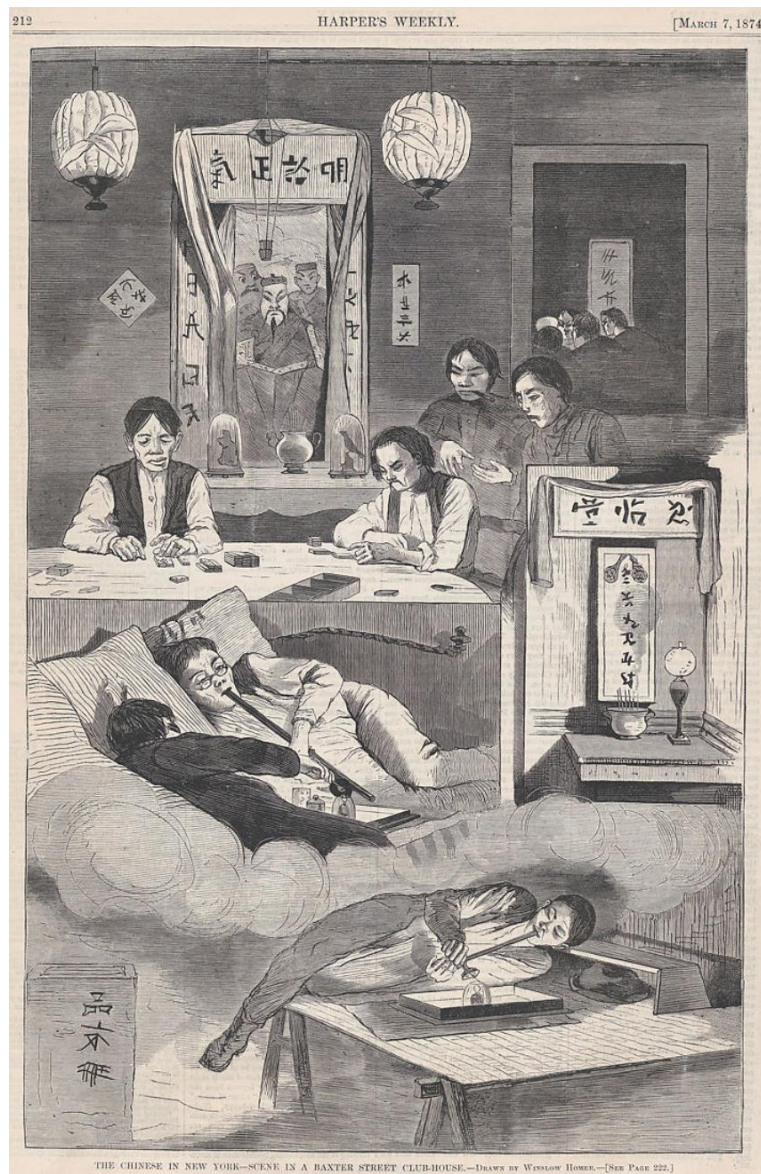
Oriental, blacks, and “degenerate” white women who associate with these alien men. The vivid representations of these dens of iniquity in Griffith’s film was very reminiscent of the American press’s descriptions of the Chinese clubhouses that had appeared in Chinatowns across the United States since the mid-nineteenth century. For instance, the two earliest Chinese clubhouses in New York were located in basements at 34 Mott Street and 12 Baxter Street. Both had been founded to provide space for fresh-off-the-boat Chinese immigrants to lounge, eat, and socialise (including gambling and smoking opium).²⁶ Some American journalists and caricaturists in the 1870s and 80s had been curious about such places and had visited them in order to “expose” them to the world. Many of these “explorers” condemned the Chinese clubhouses in their articles and described them as filthy and depraved opium dens where racial minorities and morally-corrupted white women abused drugs and alcohol. According to Jacob Riis, “The Chinaman smokes opium as Caucasians smoke tobacco, and apparently with little worse effect upon himself. But woe unto the white victim upon which his pitiless drug gets its grip!”²⁷ A drawing called “A Growing Metropolitan Evil” published on *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* in 1883 shows white women smoking opium in a clubhouse and being served by a Chinese boy. Another drawing named “The Opium Dens in Pell and Mott Street—How the Opium Habit is Developed” even shows a white woman being dragged by two Chinese men into an opium den, implying her addiction is somehow forced upon her by the Chinese. These caricatures are very similar to the visual depictions of the slum quarter in *Broken Blossoms*, suggesting Griffith was playing with, even deconstructing, Americans’ pre-existing perceptions of the Chinese community inherited from the print medias.

²⁶ Tchen, *New York before Chinatown*, p. 241.

²⁷ Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, p. 95.



(Figure 2.15: Gambling house and opium den shown in *Broken Blossoms*)



(Figure 2.16: Winslow Homer, “The Chinese in New York”, 1874)²⁸

²⁸ Winslow Homer, “The Chinese in New York—Scene in a Baxter Street Club-House,” *Harper’s Weekly* (7 March 1874). See *New York before Chinatown*, p. 240. Caricature retrieved from: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/392156>



(Figure 2.17: “A Growing Metropolitan Evil”, 1883)²⁹

²⁹ “A Growing Metropolitan Evil,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* (12 May 1883). See *New York before Chinatown*, p. 262. Caricature retrieved from: <https://imagehost.vendio.com/preview/ha/haats/FL1883P181281.jpg>

The fact that the existence of opium-addicted Chinese was stressed so much in American popular culture underlines an awareness that drug abuse was a significant national problem in China. However, Americans were also highly selective in their perceptions of the drugs issue, ignoring the fact that the problem had essentially been created and aggravated in China by the

³⁰ “New York City—The Opium Dens in Pell and Mott Streets—How the Opium Habit is Developed,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* (19 March 1883). Caricature retrieved from: <https://www.printsoldandrare.com/drugs/114drug.jpg>

policies of imperialist western countries, including their own. Unlike the manner in which it was presented in Griffith's film, opium abuse had never been as huge an issue in Britain – or the US – as it was in China. Opium from both the British Empire (hauled from India) and the US (carried from Turkey) had been ceaselessly smuggled into China since the eighteenth century, which led to the two mid-nineteenth-century Opium Wars (1839-42 and 1856-60), after which a defeated China had been forced to legalise the opium trade as the western powers, led by Britain, insisted on their right to such a lucrative business.³¹

In *Broken Blossoms*, however, opium use is completely eliminated from the China sequences but emphasised as a social problem in London. By presenting this reversed situation revolving around drug abuse in his picture, Griffith may have intended to idealise China while, perhaps, blaming Britain for creating the opium problem. If so, the message is conveyed in a very misleading way. Besides drug abuse in the vice district, badly-behaved white women are also shown associating with non-white males (Chinese, Indians, and Black people) in a sexually suggestive light. A close-up shot of a white woman reclining on a bed and smiling lasciviously in the centre of the clubhouse reflects Griffith's apparent conviction that such districts operated as focus points for interracial promiscuity. Although in *Broken Blossoms* he is making a seemingly obvious call for tolerance for the interracial relationship of Huan and Lucy, the opium den sequence actually reveals and underlines the director's criticism and distrust of interracial bonds.

³¹ Schaller, *The United States and China into the Twenty-First Century*, p.11.



(Figure 2.19: Clubhouse scene in *Broken Blossoms*)



(Figure 2.20: White women socialising with non-white men at the Chinese clubhouse – the “scarlet house of sin” as it is titled in the film)

In *Broken Blossoms*, Griffith presents the audience with a pair of antithetical types of civilisations through the depictions of the two most significant male characters – Battling

Burrows and Cheng Huan. As a film critic observed in 1919: “Richard Barthelmess as the Chinaman characterizes the role with a touch of velvet softness that shrouds with a deep appeal. Donald Crisp’s Battling Burrows is the essence of brutality and vulgar pride.”³²

Indeed, Battling Burrows is extremely masculine both physically (as he is a prize-fighter) and sexually. In the film, he drinks, curses, and boxes with a bare chest. He is also a bachelor who lives with an adolescent daughter and has relationships with different women. Battling Burrows not only epitomises but maximises “Anglo-Saxon” masculinity and heterosexuality. In the shabby hovel where Battling Burrows lives with Lucy, a bed is set in the centre of the room as the most visible motif suggesting a possible sexual relation between the two. In addition, the way Lucy behaves in the household (preparing food and drinks for him, for example) is more as a “child wife” rather than a daughter. According to Julia Lesage, the two scenes of Lucy being beaten are extremely sexually suggestive:

The first time Burrows beats Lucy, he grabs a whip from under the mattress and stands in the center of the room, holding the whip at penis height ... Lucy tries to create a diversion by telling him there is dust on his shoes and bends down to wipe off his shoes with her dress. Here, the change in composition from one shot to another connotes the act of fellatio ... As Burrows grabs Lucy's arms and throws her toward the bed near the closet, the whip is again between his legs at penis height. We see blurred, orgiastic shots of him beating her senseless. In the final beating sequence, the same connotative devices are repeated, but in a more exaggerated way. Burrows beats Lucy's face with the phallus-like whip handle, and the site of her death is actually on the bed.³³

The character Battling Burrows is, therefore, an assembly of violence, aggressiveness, and patriarchy – a signification of western pugnacity that was common to be seen in

³² Peter Milne, “Broken Blossoms,” *Motion Picture News* (24 May 1919), p. 3461.

³³ Lesage, “Artful Racism and Artful Rape in *Broken Blossoms*”, p. 52.

international affairs in the 1910s, especially in the Far East. The character Cheng Huan, on the other hand, though he seems to possess superior moral fibre, is deprived almost completely of “masculine” characteristics. At the beginning of the film, when he tries to calm down the fighting American sailors, he is easily pushed aside and tumbled over. On the street in Limehouse, he huddles against the wall, wrapping his arms in his sleeves. His softer postures indicate that he is weak in physical strength – a suggestion that he is somehow less masculine and threatening in comparison to Battling Burrows. Additionally, Cheng Huan wears a loose silky gown throughout the film and has a long-braided waist-length hair (a hairstyle for men that had been made compulsory by the Manchurian Qing Empire). In the scene when Lucy falls asleep in his room after she is found fainted at his doorway, Huan dances and spins around with hands swinging like a teenage girl. After Lucy wakes up, he even dolls her up with a Chinese silk dress and gives her several oriental trinkets. These sequences feminise and even infantilise Cheng Huan, making him appear in some respects as a girl of Lucy’s age. As Cheng Huan becomes more womanised, his masculinity is chipped away.

In the film, Griffith had to make sure that the interracial romance he presented was tolerable to American viewers in order to evoke sympathy for the couple instead of racist resentment. To achieve this, several alterations to the original story were made: for example, the erotic charge of the original story was reduced. There are two sequences in the film when Cheng Huan tries to get intimate with Lucy. The first time is when she wakes up in his store, and he wants to initiate a kiss. In the original story, the “Chink” kisses Lucy and she responds “impetuously, gladly.”³⁴ However, Griffith changed this in his film to Cheng Huan giving up on the idea of kissing when Lucy herself looks very timid and fearful. The second “almost-

³⁴ Edward Wagenknecht and Anthony Slide, *The Films of D. W. Griffith* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1975), p. 131.

intimate” scene shows Huan approaching Lucy when she plays with a doll in the bed. She seems very disturbed by his approach, so he yields eventually and only kisses her on her cuff. As a reviewer observed, “his love for her is a holy thing—it is worship.”³⁵ Compared to Battling Burrows’ implicit sexual violence against Lucy, Huan controls his erotic urges toward her and is shown accepting, though bitterly, the racial taboo. As a reviewer noted in *Variety*, “he [Cheng Huan] finds her on the floor, carries her to his living room ... showering her with every conceivable luxury, gorgeous raiment, etc., and watching over her with a love so pure as to be wholly unnatural and inconsistent.”³⁶

These scenes succeed in showing the Chinese man’s untainted love for Lucy, but they also sacrifice his manhood in doing so – white heroes, however, generally do not need to compromise their masculinity to be depicted as gentlemen. A review once described the message of film to be that “the Chinese are tender and gentle with little children, while the London prizefighter is just the reverse.”³⁷ As ironic as it is, Griffith’s presentation of an interracial romance was so obscure that it was even read by a few as a parenthood story rather than what it was supposed to be – a love story. By omitting the female protagonist’s reciprocal affection for the hero, *Broken Blossoms* reinforces the racial taboo between Chinese men and white women. Thus, the film was, at its core, neither a romantic story nor a call for tolerance towards miscegenation, but a demonstration of what a “good” Chinese man is like through the story of Huan’s unreciprocated, Platonic and sacrificial love for a white girl.

The second aspect Griffith changed from the original story was Lucy’s age. In “The Chink and the Child,” Lucy was only a twelve-year-old girl, way too young to make it acceptable to have a relationship with an older Chinese man, who might be “deviant” enough

³⁵ Milne, “Broken Blossoms,” p. 3461.

³⁶ Jole, “Broken Blossoms,” *Variety* (16 May 1919).

³⁷ M. K., “Conflicting Opinions of ‘Broken Blossoms’”, *New York Tribune* (6 July 1919).

to fall for her in the first place. It was not surprising, however, for a Chinese man to appear paedophilic in British fiction in this period because such an impression was institutionalised in the views of some British officials. A commission of inquiry established by Liverpool City Council in 1907, for example, suggested that “the Chinese appear to much prefer having intercourse with young girls, more especially those of undue precocity.”³⁸ Jacob Riis also suggested in his book about New York that many underage girls were tempted by the Chinese to hang around in Chinatown and opium dens. “Even while I am writing,” Riis claimed, “the morning returns from one of the precincts that pass through my hands report the arrest of a Chinaman for ‘inveigling little girls into his laundry,’ one of the hundred outputs of Chinatown that are scattered all over the city, as the outer threads of the spider’s web that holds its prey fast.”³⁹ When Griffith decided to film “The Chink and the Child” story, he insisted on casting Lillian Gish, then a twenty-three years-old actress, to act the part of a fifteen-year-old “woman-child” in order to reduce the paedophilic implications of the story.

Other alterations Griffith made to the original story were to portray Huan as a missionary-in-reverse and to create a positive image of Buddhism, especially by comparison to the western “civilisation” represented by the godless bully, Battling Burrows.⁴⁰ There is a sarcastic sequence when Huan meets two brothers who are clergymen at his store in Limehouse. They condescendingly tell him that one of them is leaving for China tomorrow to “convert the heathen.” Reminding him of his own shattered dream to “save” the West, Cheng Huan responds: “I, I wish him luck.” The older brother then hands Cheng a book imprinted with the title “HELL.” In fact, the western environment depicted in the film is far more hellish compared to the distant and peaceful scenes of China. Besides the visual differences between the two as discussed above, in Limehouse the working-class men are depicted as

³⁸ Richards, *China and the Chinese in Popular Film*, p. 4.

³⁹ Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, pp. 97-98.

⁴⁰ Wagenknecht and Slide, *The Films of D. W. Griffith*, p. 131.

cruel and violent, while the women are either imprisoned in families with many children and a brutal husband or else standing on the street as prostitutes – seemingly the only available life options available to Lucy as a working-class girl – and both these types of women warn Lucy to keep her distance from men. Lucy, indeed, never receives any half-decent treatment from men until she meets Huan, who commiserates with her and loves her as she deserves.

In *Broken Blossoms*, as Edward Wagenknecht observed, “Western squalor is set over against the Chinese luxury and refinement” and “Lucy’s passage from the ‘home’ where she has known only cruelty to the Oriental refuge which Cheng Huan’s loving-kindness sets up for her is a passage from hell to heaven.”⁴¹ Huan pampers Lucy with everything he can possibly offer and, reciprocally, she becomes his self-redemption in the “hellish” Limehouse he has lost his faith in. However, western cruelty breaks the harmonious bubble Huan has created for Lucy, when she is dragged home and chased into a closet by Battling Burrows wielding an axe. In this claustrophobic sequence, it is clear that there is no way out for Lucy, and she becomes hysterical seeing the axe biting through the closet door. Finally, Lucy is beaten to death by Battling Burrows in their hovel. Finding out about Lucy’s death, Cheng Huan avenges her murder by shooting Battling Burrows with a pistol and carries her body back to the Chinese store. The Chinese man makes his last confession before his Buddhist shrine and ends his own life next to Lucy’s still and cold figure. The film ends with the sound of the temple bell from the Far East, mourning the tragedy of Cheng Huan and Lucy.

In *Broken Blossoms*, Griffith emphasised the peacefulness, kindness and spiritual nature of the Chinese. The West, on the other hand, epitomised in the film by the violent Battling Burrows, the indulgent American sailors, and the arrogant British clergymen, is depicted as an arbitrary, patronising, and belligerent force – a portrayal that in many ways mirrors its historical context. In 1919, the year when the film was produced and released, China joined

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 132.

the victorious nations of World War I at the Paris Peace Conference but failed at changing its semi-colonial status and regaining its sovereignty. At Versailles, China demanded withdrawal of foreign troops from China, the abandonment of extraterritorial rights of western countries in China and the restoration of tariff autonomy.⁴²

China was particularly interested in recovering control of the former German concessions in Shandong province that had been seized by Japan during the war. The Chinese delegates worked closely with President Woodrow Wilson and relied on the United States to support its demands at the conference. Chen Duxiu – one of China’s most influential socialists and author and co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party – even praised Wilson as “the first good person in today’s world” for his advocacy of progressive ideas, including national self-determination, in his famous “Fourteen Points” speech to Congress on 8 January 1918.⁴³ At the peace conference, however, Wilson abandoned his pro-China position to acquiesce in maintaining Japan’s territorial and privileges in China (as guaranteed in a secret treaty signed by Japan and its European allies). Wilson’s performance on the Shandong issues was criticised both domestically in the US and in China. Chen Duxiu retracted what he had said earlier about the American president and commented with great disappointment in a Chinese periodical that: “At the Paris Peace Conference, every nation focuses on its own national rights. The justice, the world peace, and President Wilson’s Fourteen Points – they are all penniless empty words!”⁴⁴

The result of the Paris Peace Conference led to one of the most significant patriotic/anti-imperialism youth movements in China – the May Fourth Movement, which was launched on

⁴² Dong Wang, *The United States and China*, p. 130.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 129.

⁴⁴ Chen Duxiu, “Liangge Hehui Dou Wuyong” [Two Useless Peace Conferences], *Meizhoupinglun* [Weekly Forum], (No. 20, 4 May 1919). See Wang Dong’s *The United States and China*, p. 131. Chen Duxiu’s original article retrieved from: <http://news.southcn.com/community/shzt/youth/forerunner/200404281014.htm>

4 May 1919. On the US side, Secretary of State Robert Lansing was outraged by the president's volte-face at the conference. Many influential liberals joined Republican isolationist senator Henry Cabot Lodge in opposing the ratification of the Treaty of Versailles.⁴⁵ During the time when Griffith was making *Broken Blossoms*, news articles on Versailles, China and Shandong issues flooded American major newspapers from the East Coast to the West. "The settlement reached [on Shandong issues] is declared to be an act of aggression," *The Christian Science Monitor* reported in 1919. "A powerful ally has reaped the benefits not at the expense of a common enemy, but of a weaker ally. The virtual substitution of Japan for Germany is described as a grave matter when Japan's position in southern Manchuria is considered."⁴⁶ *Broken Blossoms*, in a way, accommodated the American public's attentions paid to the Far East at the time; it also resonated with a general sympathetic feeling toward China as a victimised figure on the world stage.

Griffith begins the film with temple bells and ends it also with a strong religious undertone, ostentatiously accentuating the superiority of Chinese civilisation. Such a suggestion – that "the ancient civilisation and religion of China are much better and finer and stronger than the Christian civilisation and religion of the Occident" – irritated some members of the American religious community.⁴⁷ A missionary wrote to the *New York Tribune*, after watching *Broken Blossoms*, claiming that "the religion of Buddha has left 400,000,000 of the Chinese people the most backward in the world; it is only now, after the labor of self-sacrificing missionaries for hundreds of years, that China is beginning to awake to her duties and responsibilities."⁴⁸ This condescending missionary ignored the fact that it

⁴⁵ Cohen, *America's Response to China*, pp. 86-87; Dong Wang, *The United States and China*, p. 131.

⁴⁶ "Shantung Decision Called by China an Act of Aggression," Special Cable to *The Christian Science Monitor* from its European News Office (5 May 1919).

⁴⁷ M. K., "Conflicting Opinions of 'Broken Blossoms'".

⁴⁸ Ibid.

was the development of science and technology, and almost never religion, that had helped the West to eclipse China economically since the eighteenth century. But comments of this type reflected the fact that although many spectators were touched by the story of “the yellow man and the girl” and impressed by the film’s aesthetic qualities, not all of them were convinced by Griffith’s ostentatious flattery of Chinese culture and religion and the rather superficial case the film offered for tolerance of interracial relationships.

It only took Griffith eighteen days and nights to finish *Broken Blossoms*, which later would come to be regarded as one of his masterpieces. However, he refused to edit the film for several weeks after he finished shooting. Griffith told Lillian Gish: “I can’t look at the damn thing; it depresses me so. Why did I ever do a story like that? It will drive the audience out of the theatre, providing you can persuade them to come in and look. I was a fool to do such a story.”⁴⁹ It may have been that Griffith was genuinely depressed by the film’s tragic ending, or he may have been worried about the reception of the film since all three main characters (both good and bad) die in the end. It is also very possible that he was never fully convinced by an interracial romance of this kind, considering his highly racist views presented earlier in *The Birth of a Nation*. For some reason, however, he began to appreciate the film once he started to edit it and finally took the complete production with confidence to the Paramount studio.⁵⁰

Broken Blossoms had a very good reception after its release and did well at the box office, grossed \$600,000 in the US alone.⁵¹ Although the story expresses sympathy toward the pair of Cheng Huan and Lucy, it cannot really be called a “love story” as the Chinese man’s love interest for Lucy – in the film – is never reciprocated. In addition to this, the tragic

⁴⁹ Lillian Gish, *The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1969), p. 220.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁵¹ Tina Ballo, *United Artists: The Company Built by the Stars* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), p. 31.

finale ensures that their relationship ends at that stage, remaining only spiritual and platonic. The character of Cheng Huan in *Broken Blossoms* was an idealised and romanticised Chinese man in American cinema. Subsequently, sexual asceticism began to be emphasised as a virtue of the “good” Chinese men, following this tradition established by Griffith. That means, in American films of the early 1920s, that Chinese men are not necessarily equated with the “yellow peril.” In many cases, indeed, ascetic, asexual, or womanised Chinese men are constructed in a favourable or sympathetic light because they are believed to be harmless to white American society.

Shadows: Chinese immigrants as permanent outsiders in the US

Shadows (1922) is a film adaption of Wilbur Daniel Steele’s short story “Ching, Ching, Chinaman,” centring on a Chinese hero, Yen Sin, and his rescue of his two Christian friends by exposing a blackmailer’s conspiracy.⁵² The story, however, is also reminiscent of the play *Ah Sin* (1877), written by Bret Harte and Mark Twain and based on Harte’s poem “The Heathen Chinees” (also known as “Plain Language for Truthful James”). The male protagonist Yen Sin not only shares a similar name with Ah Sin (the protagonist of the play), the two characters are also both laundrymen who become involuntarily involved in criminal conspiracies, outmanoeuvring all the white characters in the process. In terms of the way in which they are depicted, both Ah Sin and Yen Sin are dressed in similarly laughable ways. The “Pidgin English” they speak deliberately includes grammatical errors and mispronunciations (such as “Me washee-washee” in *Ah Sin* and “Mista Yen Sin velly humble dog, but washee colla fine” in *Shadows*) that supposedly mimic Cantonese speakers (who made up the majority of Chinese immigrants into the US in the late nineteenth century),

⁵² Tom Forman, *Shadows* (Preferred Pictures, 1922); Wilbur Daniel Steele, “Ching, Ching, Chinaman,” *The Periodical Review* (1917).

mocking their inability to speak “proper” English language while at the same time emphasising their “otherness.” Although the film sympathises with the main character, Yen Sin, and criticises Christian hypocrisy by showing the dishonesty and selfishness of two Christian pastors, it preserves the idea in the end that the Chinese population in the US, no matter how virtuous they could be, remained alien to white civilisation. In addition, the linkages between *Shadows* and *Ah Sin* reveal, to some extent, the fact that stereotypes were inherited and passed from literature to theatrical performance, before also making their appearance in movies.



(Figure 2.21: A storm brings Yen Sin to the fishing village Urkey, where he is treated as an alien from the beginning)

The film opens with the arrival of a mysterious Chinese stranger Yen Sin (Lon Chaney) in a fishing village called Urkey in the morning after a huge storm. The man has no possessions, no history, and not a single attachment to anyone else in the film – epitomising many of the real fresh-off-the-boat Chinese immigrants in the United States. Being the only “heathen” in the village, which seems quite religious, Yen Sin is physically excluded by the current residents – he lives on a boathouse at the port all by himself. Without much

explanation for this, Yen Sin naturally assumes the career of the laundryman for the whole community. During Yen Sin's stay in the village, he befriends the female protagonist Sympathy Gibbs (Marguerite De La Motte) and her second husband, Pastor John Malden (Harrison Ford). Later in the story, Sympathy's secret admirer – villain Nate Snow (John St. Polis), a local businessman – blackmails Malden by impersonating Sympathy's late husband Daniel Gibbs (Walter Long). Unwilling to lose his new family with Sympathy, Malden hides the "fact" that Daniel is still alive from his wife and he borrows money from Snow to pay off "Daniel." Tortured by guilt, Malden resigns his job as pastor, and the position is consequently given to Snow. Suspecting his friend has been framed, Yen Sin investigates the scheme concocted by Snow and unveils the truth to the villagers. After everyone reconciles with each other in the end, Yen Sin leaves Urkey on his boat dreaming about going back to China where he really belongs.

Several aspects of the film reflect to a significant degree the real situation of Chinese immigrants in the late nineteenth to early twentieth-century period and the general attitude of the American public towards them. Alongside the realities the film mirrors, however, it also reinforces the fantasised images of the Chinese as elusive and mystical subhuman "others" in the US. Firstly, Yen Sin's job suggests the real career dilemma for the Chinese labourers in America in the early twentieth century. Back in the mid-nineteenth century, when the Gold Rush was still in progress and later when Central Pacific Railroad construction began, the majority of the Chinese immigrants in California worked as gold miners and railroad construction workers – they worked alongside white labourers and their jobs were considered "manly."⁵³ As the economic depression and anti-Chinese movements began in the 1870s, white workers demanded that the government protect them from competition with cheaper imported foreign labour. Consequently, the exclusionists passed legislation to limit the

⁵³ Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, p. 100.

occupational options for Chinese immigrants, and the only job opportunities left for them were the ones devalued by white working-class males, such as cooks, waiters, and laundrymen (ones often traditionally considered as “women’s jobs”).⁵⁴ In 1900, one-fourth of Chinese male immigration worked as laundrymen in the United States, and this fixed image of Chinese men being laundrymen and servants remained as a stereotype in cinema for decades.⁵⁵

Metaphorically, according to film scholar Alice Maurice, Yen Sin was a laundryman who “do[es] the town’s dirty work ... [and] also see[s] the town’s dirty work (blackmail, adulterous desires, deceit). Yen Sin sees without being seen, and the film portrays this talent as a product both of the Yen Sin’s ‘invisible’ social standing and his inherent racial characteristics.”⁵⁶ Indeed, Yen Sin’s identity (his racial heritage and career) makes him a unique character in *Urkey*, which links the film to the “otherness” of the Chinese in American society. This aspect was brought out in the film from two perspectives – the Chinese arrived as inscrutable aliens in white Christian society, and they were forever unable to be accepted by that society. Throughout the entire story, Yen Sin is never genuinely included in *Urkey*’s community for he lives and works in his boathouse (not a decent building), and he does not attend Christian congregations because he is a Buddhist – the Chinese man, through Yen Sin, is depicted as both physically and culturally detached from the white community after his arrival. As Alice Maurice argues, “Yen Sin gains the Western audience’s sympathy without challenging the notion that ‘East is East, and West is West.’”⁵⁷

There are two Chinese characters who appear in the film: besides Yen Sin there is his

⁵⁴ Chen, “Feminization of Asian (American) Men in the U.S. Mass Media: An Analysis of *The Ballad of Little Jo*,” p. 58.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 59.

⁵⁶ Alice Maurice, *The Cinema and Its Shadow: Race and Technology in Early Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 134.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 132.

friend Sam Low, another laundryman working in a neighbouring town. Although Yen Sin is introduced as a man with no history, it seems that he magically knows other Chinese and communicates with them through a secret network even between distant locations. The two Chinese are shown exchanging detailed information by folding white men's shirts in different shapes. And by using this folding and "decoding" method alone, Yen Sin manages to crack the perplexing conspiracy concocted by Snow, the villain. Maurice suggests that Low is depicted as a duplicate of Yen Sin so that, even when he remains in his boathouse, he can project himself somewhere else. Such depictions make the Chinese man seem omniscient: he can "see without being seen," indicating the shadowy existence of Chinese immigrants in US society.⁵⁸

It was, indeed, widely believed in the US at this time that the Chinese community was marginal to mainstream society. As Bret Harte remarks in one of his stories centring on Chinese characters: "we knew that the Chinese themselves possessed some means of secretly and quickly communicating with one another."⁵⁹ The repeated representations of a Chinese secret system of communication in American stories reflected the then-prevailing conviction that the entire Chinese community was untrustworthy because they perpetuated a mysterious underground world – one that was increasingly infiltrating an unsuspecting American mainstream society. As a film critic noted in 1923: "[Yen Sin] is a frail, kindly, inscrutable little Chinese laundryman who combines the memory of an elephant with the acumen of a Sherlock Holmes ... he is a wistful, insignificant and yet intensely dominant figure."⁶⁰ The belief that the Chinese were secret conspirators or, at least, that they were capable of outsmarting naïve white men – an image that persisted from late nineteenth-century literature

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 133.

⁵⁹ Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, p. 108.

⁶⁰ Mae Tinee, "Clever Story and Cast Make Superb Film: Lon Chaney Called Marvel as Chinese in 'Shadows'", *Chicago Daily Tribune* (9 January 1923).

and plays – was obviously still relevant in 1920s cinema. It was true that the Chinese immigrants did communicate with each other through their own mother-tongue in a way incomprehensible to white Americans. However, Euro-Americans tended to expand their suspicions over this, linking such “unintelligible” communications to a range of conspiracy theories or potential dangers to the white race.

For example, social critic Henry George was convinced that the Chinese presence was questionable in an industrialised United States: he compared the Chinese to blacks in an 1869 article on “The Chinese on the Pacific Coast,” arguing that the Chinese posed a greater “danger” than the “docile” African Americans because they were less understandable by the white community. In contrast to the black population, which had lived in the US for centuries, the Chinese, as George noted, did not have “the slightest attachment to the country—[they were] utter heathens, treacherous, sensual, cowardly and cruel.” This kind of criticism was confirmed and extended even further in his later book *Progress and Poverty* (1879).⁶¹ George’s descriptions of the Chinese immigrants are consistent with the contemporary popular perceptions of the Chinese as represented by Harte and Twain’s portrayal of Ah Sin in the play and the character Yen Sin in *Shadows*/“Ching, Ching, Chinaman” — in all of these productions, the unpredictability of the Chinese caused by their impenetrability made them appear the most unwelcome part of the immigrant population to many native-born Americans, especially to those who were exclusionists.

Unlike *Broken Blossoms*’ approach to foregrounding Buddhism in a favourable light, *Shadows* uses the story of a Chinese Buddhist’s conversion to Christianity to convey a crucial message that US society can never embrace Chinese immigration in any meaningful way. In the first half of the story, Pastor Malden attempts several times to convert Yen Sin, but the Chinese man declines as he is already a devoted Buddhist. The two religious practices are

⁶¹ Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, p.109.

juxtaposed in the film—showing Yen Sin worshiping and praying before a little Buddhist shrine in his boathouse and, at the same time, the church congregations of the villagers in Urkey. Differences in social and religious behaviours between white citizens and the Chinese are therefore foregrounded. In the latter half of the film, Malden becomes increasingly obsessed with Yen Sin's conversion, especially after Malden himself begins to feel guilty for hiding the "aliveness" of Daniel (Sympathy's late husband) from his wife – it becomes obvious from this point that Malden turns his personal struggle into efforts to convert the Chinese in the hope of compensating for his own sin. It is deeply ironic, however, that the supposedly decent white characters are portrayed as more or less morally compromised, yet the righteous Chinese man becomes the "problem" that needs to be fixed in the little village. Although the majority of the villagers are shown discriminating against Yen Sin for his Chinese "alienness," the real danger and threat to the community are actually created within—from the seemingly most respectable and religious white citizens.⁶²

In the end, Yen Sin is voluntarily converted to Christianity on his deathbed, because he has been impressed that Malden is magnanimous enough to forgive and reconcile with Snow even after learning of his treacherous scheme – the film offers "the lesson of faith and humility" for the Chinese, as one reviewer remarked.⁶³ Sadly, however, instead of a final acceptance of the Chinese man by the villagers, he is ultimately shown leaving the village alone saying "Mista Yen Sin go back China-way pretty quick." The film ends with the intertitle "The storm brought him, and the storm is taking him away, but the peace he found for us is awaiting him—in the Harbour." The need for Yen Sin's conversion to Christianity has been heavily stressed in the first half of the film, seemingly to suggest that it is his non-Christian religion excludes him from the main community. However, the ending divulges the

⁶² Maurice, *The Cinema and Its Shadow*, p. 143.

⁶³ "Shadows," *Motion Picture Magazine* (February 1923).

fact that the only thing that really hinders him from being accepted by the villagers is the fact that he is a Chinese person. “Yen Sin’s houseboat seems more firmly anchored to his ancient culture and customs than to the American shore,” Maurice comments.⁶⁴

Even a contemporary film critic sensed the cruel message endorsed by the film, describing it as a story about “the conversion of an Oriental who is left to die in solitude by his Christian fellows after he has acknowledged their faith.”⁶⁵ The film *Shadows* offers an absolutely exclusionist message, brutally declaring that there was no way for a Chinese immigrant to be fully assimilated into mainstream American society, not even through religious conversion, as was often advocated. This message, though cruel, was probably accurate in terms of the realities facing Chinese immigrants in the United States in the early 1920s. In 1922, for example, the year of the film’s release, the Cable Act was passed in the United States further to restrict Chinese men’s rights of marriage.

Although *Shadows* is not a romantic story, the love interest of Yen Sin that the film hints at underlines that fact that Chinese immigrants living in the US in the early twentieth century predominantly belonged to a bachelor community, but this message was delivered in a way that justified the anti-Chinese discrimination that had led to this situation. In *Shadows*, Yen Sin is portrayed as physically unappealing in the first place – he is a middle-aged and hunch-backed man with a bowl-cut hairstyle. Lon Chaney, the actor playing Yen Sin, played Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* one year after *Shadows* and many other characters of this type in the following years, making something of specialty out of disguises and disfigured characters. As in the theatrical play *Ah Sin*, Yen Sin’s body movements are comical, and he dresses in a laughable fashion. His unattractive, if not ridiculous, appearance offers a sharp contrast to young Caucasian men such as Malden and Snow, who appear much

⁶⁴ Maurice, *The Cinema and Its Shadow*, p. 132.

⁶⁵ Fred., “Shadows”, *Variety* (3 November 1922).

more personable. Some reviewers, however, applauded Chaney's characterisation in *Shadows*. For example, critic Laurence Reid commented in *Motion Picture News*: "You marvel at his make-up and the matter in which he (Lon Chaney) catches the psychology of the character. He is the Chinaman in life—the inscrutable, mystic heathen."⁶⁶

Yen Sin is suggested in the narrative to be attracted to the female protagonist, Sympathy. In the sequence in which Sympathy and Malden finish their friendly visit and leave Yen Sin's boathouse, the Chinese man instinctively wants to touch the chair where Sympathy sat. Before he can reach the chair, however, he withdraws his hands and shakes his head as if he has been attempting something diabolical. He then kneels before a small shrine in his room and ashamedly confesses to the Buddha. Like Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*, Chinese religion here is used to show Chinese men's sexual asceticism and how the "good" Chinese know their place and discipline their libidos. It functions as a clear message sent to the spectators that an interracial relationship between a Chinese man and a white woman, or even the thought of it, is an unspeakable social taboo. A Chinese male character is only believed to be acceptable to white spectators when he is shown respecting such a taboo. This kind of image of Chinese males essentially as eunuchs reflects the fact that in the 1920s Chinese (and other Asian) males were discouraged and prevented from building any attachments or starting families in the United States by Federal law.

Since the introduction of the first Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, indeed, Chinese male immigrants to the US had been encouraged to remain in a bachelor community. In 1884, amendments were enacted to tighten up the existing restrictions, and one of the new policies implemented was to deny the rights of the wives of Chinese labourers to enter the United States.⁶⁷ The Expatriation Act of 1907 further stipulated that American women who married a

⁶⁶ Laurence Reid, "Shadows" *Motion Picture News* (26 November 1922), p. 2432.

⁶⁷ Chen, "Feminization of Asian (American) Men in the U.S. Mass Media," p. 59.

foreign husband should take the nationality of their husband's and no longer possess American citizenship. However, "at the termination of the marital relationship she may resume American citizenship."⁶⁸

By this point, there was already only a very slight chance for Chinese men actually to have families in the US, either with their own Chinese wives or with American women. Nevertheless, the Cable Act of 1922, though repealing the Expatriation Act of 1907 and guaranteed American females' independent citizenship, drew a concrete racial line and effectively singled out Chinese men as aliens ineligible to marry white women. The Act stipulated:

a woman citizen of the United States shall not cease to be a citizen of the United States by reason of her marriage after the passage of this Act, unless she makes a formal renunciation of her citizenship before a court having jurisdiction over naturalization of aliens: *Provided*, that any woman citizen who marries an alien ineligible to citizenship shall cease to be a citizen of the United States.⁶⁹

At that time, Chinese and other Asian nationals were legally ineligible for naturalisation. Therefore, what the Act was really declaring was that if an American woman married an Asian husband, she ceased to be an American citizen. According to Martha Mabie Gardner, officials of the Department of Labor at one point explicitly informed their officials in a memo that:

the Department believes it to be accurate in stating that it was the legislative intention by use of the words "ineligible to citizenship" as used in the [Cable Act] to debar from citizenship a women citizen marrying an alien who is racially disqualified from

⁶⁸ Fifty-ninth Congress, Sess. II, Ch. 2534, Sec. 2, 1907.

⁶⁹ Sixty-seventh Congress, Sess. II, Ch. 411, Sec. 3, 1922.

naturalization, for example, a Chinese or Japanese.⁷⁰

This discrimination against Asian immigration continued to expand after the Cable Act. Two years later, the Immigration Act of 1924 was introduced and all immigration from Asia was banned. Consequently, the film *Shadows* not only exemplifies the fact that representations of the Chinese in early Hollywood films were adapted from the preceding stereotypes existed in literatures, caricatures, and theatrical performances of the late nineteenth century. It also to some extent reflects the real living conditions and social environment for the Chinese (mainly male) immigrants in the US and, by so doing, can be seen to some extent as normalising the discriminatory treatment that Chinese immigrants received at the time.

In 1923, a song titled “Ching, Ching, Chinaman” and composed by Louis F. Gottschalk and Eve Unsell was published as a publicity material for promoting *Shadows*.⁷¹ Although the film superficially sympathises with the Chinese, the racist theme song proves otherwise – the lyrics read:

Dreams of far-off Chinalan'
Laugh and laugh when velly sad
And even laugh when mad
See his funny little walk
Hear his funny talkee talk
Queer little quaint Chinaman

⁷⁰ Martha Mabie Gardner, *The Qualities of a Citizen: Women, Immigration, and Citizenship, 1870-1965* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 139-140.

⁷¹ Louis F. Gottschalk and Eve Unsell, “Ching, Ching, Chinaman,” *American Melting Pot Collection* (New York: Jerome H. Remick & Co., 1923).

Ching Ching Chinaman
 Ketchee ketchee if you can
 Blandly smiles and so beguiles
 With Oriental wiles
 Chop-chop-suey Yocky main
 This mean Eatee all you can
 Queer little quaint Chinaman

Ching Ching Chinaman
 Ching Ching Chinaman
 Eatee lychee nuts and play fan-tan
 Singee high and singee low
 Like a shadow come and go
 Allee samee Ching Ching Chinaman
 Ching Ching Chinaman
 Washee velly fine
 Makee muchee goodee 'melican dime
 Where he go you never know
 What he think he never show
 Winky blinky Chinky Chinaman

From the song, people see the tableau of a strange Chinese laundryman not much different from Harte and Twain's Ah Sin in 1877 or Edward Harrigan's Hog Eye in *The Mulligan Guard's Chowder* in 1879. The stereotype of an odd-looking, mysterious and

inscrutable Chinese man has evolved from the nineteenth century to the twentieth, from stage to cinema. With the enactment of the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924, the public attitudes towards Asian peoples in the United States showed a further deterioration. At the same time, however, fantasies about China never ceased to develop in American films. Hollywood's imagination concerning the Oriental world began to soar, and the type of Chinese characters it preferred to foreground, as a result of the less friendly social environment towards Asian nationals, gradually altered from an overall sympathetic and victimised stereotype to a more empowered but also more negative villain type.

Mr. Wu (1927)—The Evil and Revengeful Manchurian Father

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, the year 1924 witnessed a turning point in the representations of Chinese people in American films. After the passage of the Asian Exclusion Act, an increasing number of unsympathetic representations of the Chinese appeared in Hollywood productions. *Mr. Wu* was one of the earliest films centring on evil Manchurian fathers. Many people today may be more familiar with the malicious Dr. Fu Manchu, a fictional character who appeared frequently in western media in the twentieth century. Fewer are aware, however, that the character Mr. Wu (Wu Li Chang) was the well-known embodiment of the “yellow-peril” in American plays, literature, and films long before Fu Manchu made his appearance on the big screen in the United States. In MGM's *Mr. Wu* (1927), released two years before Hollywood's first-ever Fu Manchu film (*The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu* [1929]), the male protagonist Mr. Wu is portrayed as physically resembling the “John Chinaman/Confucius” figure well-known in print medias: he dresses in Manchurian-styled robes and has slanted eyes and a signature thin and long moustache. The latter would later evolve into the iconic “Fu Manchu” moustache after *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932), featuring Boris Karloff as the evil mastermind, but it appeared earlier with

the character Mr. Wu in 1927.⁷²

The story of Mr. Wu was originally introduced in a play (written by Maurice Vernon and Harold Owen) premièred in London in 1913, the same year that Sax Rohmer's first *Fu Manchu* book was published. In the play, Mr. Wu kills his own daughter Nang Ping after he finds she has been fornicating with an Englishman, Basil Gregory. Wu then seeks vengeance for the seduction of his daughter by imprisoning the Gregory family and forces Mrs. Gregory to choose between her son's life and her own virtue. However, before she can make her decision, Wu accidentally kills himself by drinking the poisoned tea he has made for her. The play was a sensation after its debut, and it ran for many months in the West End of London in 1913-14.

According to Wendy Gan, the reason for the huge success of the play in the United Kingdom, besides the extravagant *mise-en-scène* that opened the eyes of the 1910s' British audiences in the theatre and fuelled their imagination and curiosity about the Oriental world, was the story's shocking revelation that the West could be powerless when facing the furious vengeance of the East.⁷³ In this period, the Manchurian empire (the Qing China) appeared to the West as an antiquated regime too incompetent to maintain its own sovereignty and national integrity on the world stage. Consequently, Chinese protests and demands, lacking the support of a powerful and effective Chinese government, were largely ignored by other nations. The play *Mr. Wu* hinted at this reality – presenting a Chinese man, Wu, as a furious patriarchal figure determined to obtain revenge over the West, represented by Gregory, for the defilement of his daughter Nang Ping at any cost (even including the sacrifice of her life). With the memory of the Boxer Rebellion (during which the Boxers killed both foreign

⁷² William Nigh, *Shadows* (MGM, 1927); Rowland V. Lee, *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu* (Paramount Pictures, 1929); Charles Brabin, *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (Cosmopolitan Productions, 1932).

⁷³ Wendy Gan, "From Peril to Pity: The Transformations of *Mr. Wu*," *Adaption*, vol. 9, no. 3 (1 December 2016), p. 363.

missionaries and their Chinese converts) still current with early 1910s' audiences, the story of vengeance pursued by a desperate Manchurian father proved a popular and critical success.

The play was later turned into a novel in 1918 by Louise Jordan Miln, who had a personal interest in and affection for China. Her novel enhanced the humanity of the character Wu by including a background story of his childhood memories, which helped to explain his stubborn insistence on protecting his family heritage and tradition even at the expense of his daughter's life. Miln's novelisation also included depictions of Wu's relationship with his daughter Nang Ping, suggesting Wu, after all, was a loving father in his own way.

Hollywood's film adaption of *Mr. Wu* was largely based on Miln's version of the story and adopted some of the author's sympathetic view of this Chinese man. For example, it, too, includes sequences about Wu's childhood and portrays him as an "affectionate" father, including showing him expressing pensive agony both before and after killing Nang Ping.

In addition, the cinematic Wu is shown, in the end, voluntarily giving up ordering his henchmen to hunt down the escaped Gregory family and following Nang Ping's ghost for a family reunion in another world. These things are interpreted by Wendy Gan as an indication that Wu's love and grief for his daughter surpassed the hatred in his heart. Furthermore, the representation of Mr. Wu as a Manchurian who fails really to punish the West in the end, Gan argues, implied that the antiquated Qing China (which had been replaced by the Republic of China from 1912) did not pose a danger to the West anymore.⁷⁴ These optimistic readings by Gan of the film *Mr. Wu* are based on thorough comparisons of the evolving versions of the story over two decades. However, they are misleading without consideration of the historical context of the period when the film was produced and the ways in which it was perceived by the public.

First of all, the cinematic Mr. Wu was played by Lon Chaney, who had by then been

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 373.

acclaimed by the press as “the man of a thousand faces” for his excellence in playing extraordinary-looking characters, for example, the Chinese laundry man Yen Sin in *Shadows* (as discussed above), Fagin in *Oliver Twist* (1922), Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923), the tragic Clown HE in *He Who Gets Slapped* (1925), the Phantom in *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), The Man in the Beaver Hat in *London after Midnight* (1927), and the clown Tito in *Laugh, Clown, Laugh* (1928).⁷⁵



(Figure 2.22: Chaney as Fagin in *Oliver Twist*)

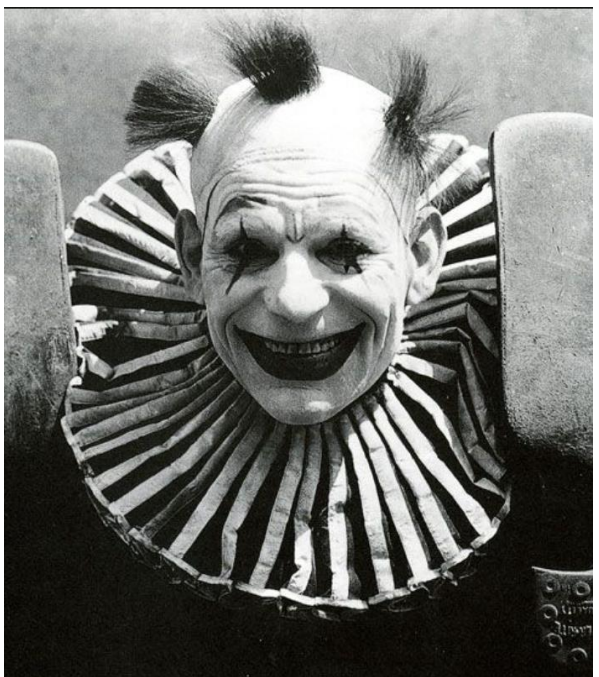


(Figure 2.23: Chaney as Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*)

⁷⁵ Frank Lloyd, *Oliver Twist* (Jackie Coogan Productions, 1922); Wallace Worsley, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Universal Pictures 1923); Rupert Julian, *The Phantom of the Opera* (Universal Pictures, 1925); Victor Sjöström, *He Who Gets Slapped* (MGM, 1925); Tom Browning, *London after Midnight* (MGM, 1927); Herbert Brenon, *Laugh, Clown, Laugh* (MGM, 1928).



(Figure 2.24: Chaney as Phantom in *The Phantom of the Opera*)(Figure 2.25: Chaney in *London after Midnight*)



(Figure 2.26: Chaney as HE in *He Who Gets Slapped*)

(Figure 2.27: Chaney as Mr. Wu)

For audiences of the 1920s, it was easy to associate Chaney's portrayal of Wu with the many deformed human figures he had masterfully played in his career. For example, a film reviewer pointed out in the *Boston Daily Globe* that "as Grandfather Wu [a minor role which was also played by Chaney in the *Mr. Wu*], Chaney does a masterly characterization of the

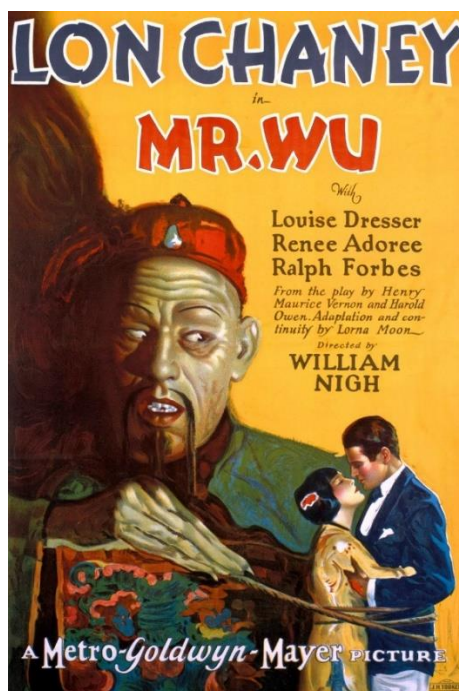
sort that the public has associated with him from his successes in such photoplays as ‘The Hunchback of Notre Dame.’”⁷⁶

According to Alice Maurice, Chaney had played so many masquerade-style and disfigured characters that reviews in the twenties tended to make special comment when he appeared “without any twisted limb or facial disguise.”⁷⁷ Some critics devalued this kind of “body-centred” performances and believed that they “emphasize the physical over the psychological.”⁷⁸ The studio’s casting choice of an actor who specialised in peculiar and deformed-looking roles to play the Chinese protagonist itself suggests that the Chinese were regarded in Hollywood of the late 1920s more as fairly sub-human creatures and oddities to gawk at than as equal human beings to be portrayed and understood. The film company also seemed to give a push towards exaggerating the monstrosity of the Chinese man in its publicity materials – the poster of the film *Mr. Wu*, for instance, presenting the Chinese man (with a green face, thin eyebrows, long moustache and pointed fingernails) viciously looking at Nang Ping and her English lover from behind.

⁷⁶ “‘Mr. Wu,’ Film at Loew’s State: Lon Chaney Vivid Pictures Chinese Mandarin – Syncopators and Oriental Jazz,” *Boston Daily Globe* (17 May 1927).

⁷⁷ Maurice, *The Cinema and Its Shadow*, p. 140.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*



(Figure 2.28: Poster for *Mr Wu* [1927])

In the first handbook of movie make-up published in 1927, *The Art of Make-up for Stage & Screen* – a textbook for the industry – the author Cecil Holland, a famous make-up artist of the time who would design the Fu Manchu “look” for Boris Karloff in *The Mask of Fu Manchu* in 1932, described the Chinese under the section titled “The Chinaman” as “an Oriental, stupendous in numbers, moderate in achievements, magnificent in honesty, stoic, stubborn, secretive. A sleeping dragon, drugged by traditional and national addiction ... The Chinaman.”⁷⁹ Holland’s description indicated that Hollywood’s reconstructions of Chinese people were based on stereotypes, and these were emphasised at first through the appearance of the characters.

Despite this dehumanisation and demonization of the Chinese character, however, many film critics applauded the characterisation of Wu in the film and believed Chaney’s performance was very convincing as a genuine Chinese man. *The Sun* remarked that “Mr. Chaney’s adroitness in make-up is revealed at its best” in the presentation of the character

⁷⁹ Maurice, *The Cinema and Its Shadow*, p. 137; Cecil Holland, *The Art of Make-up for Stage and Screen* (California: Cinematex, 1927), p. 70.

Grandfather Wu.⁸⁰ *The Washington Post* also commented that “his [Lon Chaney’s] walk, his every action—in fact, his personality, turned Chinese for the picture. It is said that he did it by studying Chinese customs, philosophy, literature, until he actually thought from a Chinese standpoint.”⁸¹ The eponymous film critic for the *Chicago Daily Tribune* Mae Tinee [matinee] marvelled at Chaney’s make-up and commented in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* that “Master of makeup that he is, he has never skilfully wrought wonders upon his appearance than in the present instance. He not only looks the Chinaman of high caste, but he IS a subtle, sinister mandarin ...”⁸² Based on comments of this kind, viewers were not only accepting of Chaney’s cinematic characterisation but assuming the fictional character Mr. Wu to be a real Chinese man and Hollywood’s fantasy of the Orient to be the real China, even though the entire story was merely a fabrication created by British writers, novelised by an American author, and then adapted into a motion picture by American film-makers.



⁸⁰ T. M. C., “At the Movies This Week: Lon Chaney Appears in Duel Role in ‘Mr. Wu’ at Valencia—‘Vanity’ Show on the New Theatre Screen,” *The Sun* (24 May 1927).

⁸¹ “Lon Chaney Held over at Colombia,” *The Washington Post* (12 June 1927).

⁸² Mae Tinee, “Able Cast Presents This Tale of China,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (8 May 1927).

(Figure 2.29: Chaney as Grandfather Wu in *Mr. Wu*)

The story of Mr. Wu – an angry Easterner relentlessly retaliating against the West that has wronged him – had some resonance also with the East-West conflict that broke out as a result of unrest in China in the 1920s. On 30 May 1925, a Chinese worker was killed at a Japanese mill in Shanghai during a strike. On the same day, the British Municipal Police opened fire on Chinese demonstrators who were supporting the strike against Japanese-owned firms at the International Settlement in Shanghai, causing a further eleven deaths – a massacre that prompted the emergence of the patriotic and anti-imperialism movement known as the May Thirtieth Movement.⁸³ Strikes, boycotts and protests began to spread down the Chinese coast all the way to Hong Kong. In June 1925, the Canton-Hong Kong Strike took place in these two areas as a response to the Shanghai incident. On 26 June, moreover, fifty-two more Chinese students were massacred by British troops in Guangdong (Canton), which further fuelled anti-imperialist sentiment in China.

The Canton-Hong Kong Strike had become an event reported across the world that lasted for more than a year until its official end in October 1926.⁸⁴ The ensuing boycott of British goods caused a sharp reduction of British trade in China and the strikes also paralysed British Hong Kong almost entirely. It was claimed in the *Los Angeles Times* that “China is leading a gigantic Asiatic revolt against domination by the white man.”⁸⁵ Journalist Josef Washington “Upton Close” Hall observed the big strike in person and reported on it in 1927 that:

Factory hands, houseboys and rickshaw coolies employed by the white man were

⁸³ Cathal J. Nolan, “Shanghai Massacre,” *The Greenwood Encyclopaedia of International Relations: S-Z* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), p. 1509.

⁸⁴ John M. Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong* (Plymouth: Rowan and Littlefield, 2007), p. 100.

⁸⁵ Josef Washington (“Upton Close”) Hall, “What’s Happening in China,” *Los Angeles Times* (24 April 1927).

organized through methods taught by Michael Borodin into unions which constantly demonstrated and increased their demands on the residents. The foreigner was boycotted. He could sell nothing, buy nothing, get no transportation. Chinese electricians closed down the light plant, the water works followed suit. Whisky-soda boys refused to serve this life-giving concoction of the Orient. Slop carriers failed to remove refuse. There are not sewage systems in most Chinese cities. Life became unbearable. The residents left.⁸⁶

Hall stressed in his article that, although the United States had had a taste of several boycotts in China before, for example, after 1884 and in 1905 as retaliations for the Chinese Exclusion Acts, the Canton-Hong Kong Strike was more organised than ever – it was executed with support from guilds and labour unions, through which the boycott and demonstrations were guided by Russian advisers. China's more strategic revolt (using "the economic weapon" – as it was dubbed by the Russians) against the western powers and its growing connections with Russia were considered dangerous and unsettling to other imperialist powers. Hall warned in his article that although the US was temporarily enjoying a growing foreign trade with China due to its declined trade with Great Britain, "the Chinese are as ready to apply the boycott to [the US], bringing our trade to a dead stop, as to the British if we give provocation."⁸⁷

The film *Mr. Wu* came out at an opportune moment in 1927, when China was described by many in the press as a waking dragon ready to retaliate against an imperialistic West that had mistreated it. In *Mr. Wu*'s original film reviews, it is notable that many critics emphasised the revenge theme of the story, presenting the Chinese as a hateful and vengeful force. *The Hartford Courant* called the film a "strange story of Oriental vengeance," portraying Lon Chaney as "the mysterious Mandarin plotting a fiendish revenge against an English family

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

which had wronged him.”⁸⁸ In formulating the story, it was claimed in this review that Chinese laws, customs and legal punishments had been thoroughly studied – “these punishments, which to the American minds seem barbarous, to the Chinese way of thinking are not only correct, but evidences of a civilization that, in the words of the Mikado of the comic opera, ‘made the punishment fit the crime.’”⁸⁹ *The Washington Post* described Mr. Wu as “the silent, subtle and sinister mandarin, versed in the knowledge of ages; almost uncanny in his insight into human character and his enormous power, pursuing his relentless program of revenge against a family who wronged him.”⁹⁰ In this film, the two sets of images of China in western culture – on the one hand highly intelligent and cultured, on the other cruel and barbarous – become entangled and manifested themselves through the character Wu. Although he retaliates against Gregory for a reason, the director William Nigh had no intention of making the character sympathetic—1927 audiences were apparently chilled by the cinematic Mr. Wu, and his death was seen as a justifiable punishment that only arrives too late. Reviewer Grace Kingsley commented in the *Los Angeles Times*:

“Mr. Wu” is in its essence merely another attempt of the western mind to fathom the eastern, and as usual, it leaves us cold. It is impossible to feel any sympathy with Lon Chaney after he has killed his own daughter, no matter how much he emotes, no matter how many tears he sheds. Had he killed himself after that, we might have felt a bit sorry for him. But killing daughters by loving fathers simply isn’t done in our set these days, and so Mr. Wu’s post-mortem grief fails to affect us.⁹¹

Many elements in *Mr. Wu* later frequently appeared in other Hollywood films

⁸⁸ “Lon Chaney heads Strand Picture Bill as Weird ‘Mr. Wu’: Thrilling Oriental Film Presents Chaney as Scheming mandarin,” *The Hartford Courant* (1 May 1927).

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ “Lon Chaney in ‘Mr. Wu’ at Columbia,” *The Washington Post* (5 June 1927).

⁹¹ Grace Kingsley, “Oriental Maid Suffers Again,” *Los Angeles Times* (15 April 1927).

representing China and Chinese people, including revenge themes, Manchurian villains, and filicide. Although Gan argues that the film version, largely based on Miln's novelisation, sympathetically depicted the character Wu, it is evident that the film was understood very differently by its contemporary audience from what Gan claims. The casting of Lon Chaney and his dehumanising characterisation of Mr. Wu and Grandpa Wu, together with the film's timely release during the time when China was depicted by the American press as a revengeful waking dragon, made it difficult for the contemporary audience to really relate to and sympathise with the Manchurian man in the film. Mr. Wu was, therefore, a negative and derogatory portrayal of Chinese people rather than a progressive one.

In the early Hollywood films about China and the Chinese (those released in the 1910s and 20s), it is observed that the construction of Chinese people was significantly affected by three factors. Culturally, many famous Chinese stories were adapted from or at least inspired by European, especially British, fictional creations. For example, the "Lotus Flower" stereotype (represented by the Manchurian daughters shown respectively in *The Forbidden City*, *The Toll of the Sea*, and *Mr. Wu*) was essentially a variation of Madame Butterfly – an operatic character originally created by Italian composer Giacomo Puccini. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* – a big financial success in 1919 – was a film adaption of British author Thomas Burke's "The Chink and the Child" in *Limehouse Nights*. And the film *Mr. Wu* was also based on a British stage play written by Harold Owen and Harry M. Vernon. The Old World's view of the Far East, therefore, played a crucial part in shaping the New World's early cinematic story-telling about China.

Politically, Hollywood's China in this era spoke to political realities to certain extent. For example, many productions suggested China's victimised position on the world stage, suffering from imperialistic encroachment, by foregrounding sympathetic Chinese characters

under some sort of exploitation from westerners. Although more and more unsympathetic Chinese characters – such as Mr. Wu and Fu Manchu – appeared after 1924, their ruthless hostility toward westerners was often portrayed as retaliation for a preceding invasion or violation initiated by the West. Socially, when Chinese characters were presented in occidental settings (e.g. as immigrants in America or Britain), their occupations and social status often parallel real Chinese immigrants' living status in the US under the Federal Government's exclusionist policies of the time. The fictional stories produced by Hollywood hinted at these cultural, political, and social truths and created an illusion for the audience that these fantasised Chinese people and China in films were realistic, hence reinforcing American imaginings and misunderstandings about China. It was almost never noted at the time when these films were produced that none of their Chinese characters were played by real Chinese people, and the stories they were in were merely fictions created by western authors. Films produced in this period played a significant role in the history of constructing China and Chinese people in American film – they witnessed the transition of the image of the Chinese from literature and theatrical works to cinema. The cinematic images of Chinese people produced in 1910s-20s American films later became the archetype for film-makers in the coming decades to use and develop in depicting their own fantasies of China and its people.

Chapter Three: The Great Depression and China in Pre-Code Hollywood

The American film industry, like many other businesses, experienced a rough start to the Depression years of the 1930s. With frantic expansion during the “Roaring Twenties” (“speculative investments in theater chains”) and the money spent on the “conversion to sound” after 1927, the motion picture industry was “most vulnerable financially and unsteady aesthetically” when the stock market crash took place in October 1929.¹ From 1930, major Hollywood studios started more palpably to feel the pinch – receipts kept dropping and, by 1931, box office returns in most cities had dropped 10 percent to 35 percent. Movie theatres began to experiment with various marketing ideas to boost attendance. According to Thomas Doherty, buying a ticket at this time was usually combined with a chance to win raffles and free giveaways, including household supplies and appliances, cash, automobiles, free trips, and, in one case, free psychotherapy served with ice cream.² All the major studios suffered significant financial loss or deficits, and this situation did not improve until the fall of 1933.³ However, it was believed by many, including government personnel, that Americans needed movie entertainment even more during this time of economic adversity. Walter Gifford, the head of President Herbert Hoover’s Organisation on Unemployment relief, advocated distributing free film tickets to the poor in 1932 because, he believed, movies were a necessity only just behind food and clothes in priority.⁴

During the early Depression years, the American movie industry made extra efforts to encourage theatre attendance. Besides the part that theatres themselves had played (the free giveaways mentioned before and entertaining activities, such as Bank Night [a lottery game]

¹ Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, p. 17.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 28-30.

³ Andrew Bergman, *We’re in the Money: Depression America and Its Films* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1972), pp. xxi-xxii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

and Screeno [a type of bingo game at movie theatres]), producers and screenwriters also devoted themselves to inventing intriguing plots or exciting genres to appeal to the widest possible audience. The most popular films during the Depression era are now widely seen as escapist films – ones that were light-hearted and fanciful, represented by genres such as musicals and comedies. Other popular genres at the time explored a series of dark, unlawful and dangerous themes, for example, gangster films, horror films, and adventure films. According to Doherty, the popularity of these pictures may have had to do with offering a suffering people “inducements to immorality and incitements to insurrection” or, perhaps, satisfying Depression-worn audiences’ need for an “opiate” to “[dull] revolutionary fervor with two-hour doses of false consciousness”.⁵ As a consequence of film-makers’ accommodation to movie-goers’ particular appetite at this time for edgy and dangerous themes, some bold and suggestive representations (of sex and crime, for instance) were produced in films during the early Depression Era despite the existence of the Production Code (a moral guideline for film industry to follow) introduced in 1930 by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). Hollywood’s bold flirtation with social taboos in presenting sex and crime in this period ultimately led to the foundation of the Production Code Administration (PCA), Hollywood’s self-regulatory agency, created in 1934 to enforce the Production Code.

The era that would become known as Pre-Code Hollywood, from 1930 to 1934, was a unique period in Hollywood history. It communicated imagination in its expression and presentation of various subjects and issues. As Thomas Doherty writes, it “negotiated the cultural dislocations by venting insurrectionist impulses and reformulating American myths during a time uncongenial to their straight-faced assertion”.⁶

⁵ Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, pp. 18-19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

Moreover, feature films about China and things Chinese also began to thrive in the Pre-Code era. China themes double-dipped in films that were both escapist and offered a kind of mental “opiate.” There was nothing more distant, both physically and mentally, than the Far East as an escapist backcloth for 1930s Americans. It was also exhilarating for many to make a mental journey to the Orient, to explore it, to confront it, and, perhaps, to romance with Orientals, even at the expense perhaps of being punished for it. Some famous fictional Chinese characters such as the sinister Dr. Fu Manchu (though he had made his appearances on the big screen in the late 1920s) would become household names during the early 1930s.

Fu Manchu: “the yellow peril incarnate in one man”

The evil Chinese mastermind Fu Manchu was originally created by English author Sax Rohmer. The character first appeared in Rohmer’s novel *The Mysterious Fu Manchu* (1913). It was an immediate commercial hit, and so the stories of Fu Manchu began to be serialised by Rohmer over the following forty-six years. During the twentieth century, many countries produced numerous film adaptations of Rohmer’s stories of this evil Chinese man, especially during the periods before and after World War II. However, the earliest cinematic adaptations of the Fu Manchu saga were two silent films serials produced by British director Harry Agar Lyons in 1923-24. Hollywood followed a few years later, making a talkie trilogy—*The Mysterious Fu Manchu* (1929), *The Return of Fu Manchu* (1930), and *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931) — featuring Warner Oland as the sinister Fu Manchu and Anna May Wong as his daughter Ling Moy (although Ling only appeared in the last episode of the trio). According to Jeffrey Richards, Fu Manchu was transformed in this American serial from a power-crazed oriental mastermind who seeks domination and subjugation of the West (as in Rohmer’s original books) into a victimised Chinese man who becomes obsessed with avenging his family killed by British troops during the violent suppression of the Boxer

Rebellion by eliminating the English officers concerned (and their families).⁷ In Hollywood's version, therefore, Fu Manchu's hostility towards the West is legitimated as a backlash against European imperialism.

In the first reviews of *The Mysterious Fu Manchu* after its release in 1929, many critics expressed sympathy toward Oland's Fu and described him as a kind and learned scholar driven insane by the massacre of his family by the "white invaders of his country."⁸ Although not many would later remember this, Hollywood's first-ever Fu Manchu film actually foregrounded the kindness and innocence of Fu Manchu himself before his family was murdered by the English. Film critic Mae Tinee, for example, summarises the film's plot in a sympathetic light in a review entitled "Movie Explains Why Fu Manchu Hated English: Sax Rohmer's Villain is Given an Excuse." Tinee wrote that:

Dr. Fu Manchu (Warner Oland at his most suave and sinister!) is a famous Chinese physician philanthropist, who is friendly with the English until—during the Boxer Rebellion, while he is shielding the baby daughter of an Englishman ... [Fu's] own home is mistakenly wrecked and his wife and little son killed by English Troops.⁹

Fu Manchu's evolution into a vengeful maniac was, therefore, originally explained by reference to mistreatment he has received in his homeland from foreign aggressors.

The two other films in this trilogy carried on the revenge theme of the story of Fu

⁷ Richards, *China and the Chinese in Popular Film*, p. 36.

⁸ D. K., "At the Movies this Week: 'The Hottentot,' with Edward Everell Horton, at Metropolitan – 'The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu,' with Warner Oland, at Stanley", *The (Baltimore) Sun* (18 August 1929). Other reviews of the film that hold similar views of the character Fu Manchu include: C. S. D., "London and China Locale for Picture: 'Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu' at Allyn-Publix Co Features Warner Oland and Neil Hamilton", *The Hartford Courant* (10 August 1929); "Warner Oland Star in Talkie Thriller of Boxer Rebellion: 'Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu' Feature at Allyn-Publix Theater," *The Hartford Courant* (11 August 1929); "Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu" at Five Public Theatres," *Daily Boston Globe* (1 September 1929).

⁹ Mae Tinee, "Movie Explains Why Fu Manchu Hated English: Sax Rohmer's Villain is Given an Excuse," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (15 July 1929).

Manchu, developing both his madness and his power to a supernatural level. *Daughter of the Dragon* – the last sequel of the trio – has Fu Manchu’s daughter Princess Ling Moy carrying on her father’s uncompleted campaign of vengeance on an English young man, Ronald Petrie (Bramwell Fletcher), whose father had been the general leading the troops that destroyed Fu Manchu’s home in China. In the film, Ling Moy is portrayed as being attracted to Petrie, but she chooses her family feud over her own romantic interest and attempts to murder the young man. In the nick of time, however, she is shot dead by a righteous Chinese secret agent Ah Kee, played by Japanese actor Sessue Hayakawa – the first big Asian star in Hollywood and one of the most famous actors of the silent era.¹⁰

After the previous two films of the trio, Fu Manchu’s revenge adventures had become sufficiently familiar to the American cinema-going public. However, the presence of Hayakawa and Wong, two Asian actors, seems to have excited audiences—some of the reviews of *Daughter of Dragon* observed that movie-goers marvelled at the pair and paid particular attention to their appearance and way of speaking English. For example, film critic D. K. commented in *The [Baltimore] Sun* that “everyone will want to see this film if only to contemplate Sessue Hayakawa on his return to the screen, and to enjoy the charming performance of the extremely beautiful Anna May Wong, whose English, by the way, is better than that of many American stars.”¹¹ Another reviewer also noted in *The Hartford Courant* that “Hayakawa and Miss Wong make a splendid team. Miss Wong’s cultured English diction is a delight. Hayakawa still experiences trouble with his r’s, but his restrained acting more than compensates for this deficiency.”¹² More reviews of this kind commented on the

¹⁰ See Daisuke Miyao, *Sessue Hayakawa: Silent Cinema and Transnational Stardom* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹¹ D. K., “Screen: My Sin, with Tallulah Bankhead, at Century. Daughter of the Dragon, at Keith’s,” *The Baltimore Sun* (26 September 1931).

¹² “Fu Manchu Film Tops Regal Bill: Anna May Wong, Sessue Hayakawa and Warner Oland in ‘Daughter of the Dragon’”, *The Hartford Courant* (30 October 1931). For more comments on Wong and Hayakawa’s appearances see: Muriel Babcock, “‘Daughter of Dragon’

English-speaking of the stars and Wong's appearance. Although it was common for film critics to comment on sounds in films in the era when talkies were still considered relatively innovative, the particular attention paid to the looks and diction of Asian actors and actresses suggests that, similar to Lon Chaney's "body-centred" performances (discussed above), Asian performers were regarded as visual and auditory stimuli in American cinema at this time.

In western portrayals of Asian women at the time, the vengeful character Princess Ling Moy was considered atypical because the principal screen construct of Asiatic femininity during this period was the sympathetic and sacrificial "Madame Butterfly"/"Lotus Flower". One explanation for the emergence of a negative Chinese female stereotype, distinctive from the conventional representations of other Asian women, is that Chinese women were historically viewed as a morally questionable group in American society as early as the late nineteenth century—the ratification of the Page Act of 1875 barred Chinese women from entering the United States, with its supporters claiming that the majority, if allowed into the country, would assume an immoral occupation (prostitution) and undermine American morality.

This impression of Chinese women being indecent and over-sexualised became more widespread in succeeding decades. Another possible historical reason for the emergence of unsympathetic Chinese female characters in contrast to obedient and romanticised women such as Butterfly might be the differing national strengths of Qing China and Japan as countries. According to Karen Kuo, "Japan represented a formidable Eastern power after its defeat of Russia in the Sino-Russo war [the Russo-Japanese war (1904-1905)] and its stable and unified (if not repressive) government contrasted sharply with China's weak and

Shown," *Los Angeles Times* (29 August 1931); Mae Tinee, "Critics Believes This Must End Dr. Fu Manchu: Says 'Daughter of Dragon' Excites Children," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (8 September 1931).

decentralized government.”¹³ Seeing the rise of Japan and the decline of the Qing empire in Asia at the beginning of the twentieth century, many Americans, including President Theodore Roosevelt, admired Japan as a capable and open-minded country while Qing China was regarded as backward and in a desperate state. Although the overthrow of the Qing empire in 1912 marked a new start for China, its chaotic and unstable political situation (the Chinese Civil War, the Warlord Era, and then the Sino-Japanese War) persisted for decades. In 1926, an unconventional Chinese woman, subverting the “Madame Butterfly” image, was constructed in a 1926 Broadway play called *The Shanghai Gesture*. In the play, the female protagonist “Mother Goddam” was portrayed as a hypersexualised and powerful Chinese woman who seeks revenge on an Englishman who has mistreated her. Wong’s 1931 performance as Fu Manchu’s daughter in *Daughter of the Dragon*, very reminiscent of the femme fatale-style “Mother Goddam” in *The Shanghai Gesture*, introduced the first widely-remembered onscreen “Dragon Lady” to American audiences in the pre-Production Code Administration era.

After the last episode of Oland’s 3-film Fu Manchu series, one of the most fanciful Fu Manchu movies – *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, the only one featuring Boris Karloff as Fu Manchu – was produced in 1932 by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, then the biggest film company in the US.¹⁴ At the time, MGM was in partnership with Cosmopolitan Productions, a company owned by William Randolph Hearst, whose publishing empire was particularly responsible for disseminating an anti-Chinese message – the “yellow peril” fear – during this period in order to promote stricter immigration restrictions against people from Asian countries.¹⁵ It was consequently unsurprising that MGM-Cosmopolitan became interested in

¹³ Karen Kuo, “*The Shanghai Gesture*: Melodrama and Modern Women in the East/West Romance,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 29, no. 2 (3 February 2012), p. 102.

¹⁴ Charles Brabin, *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (MGM, 1932).

¹⁵ Ruth Mayer, “Image Power: Seriality, Iconicity, and *The Mask of Fu Manchu*,” *Screen*, vol. 53, no. 4 (Winter 2012), p. 402.

making a Fu Manchu film, casting Boris Karloff, borrowed from Universal, for the leading role. By 1932, before *The Mask of Fu Manchu* was made, Karloff had already made his name playing evil characters in horror films – he played the monster in *Frankenstein* (1931), had just finished another horror film called *The Old Dark House* (1932) as the villain, and was expected to play the lead in two more horrors — *The Mummy* (1932) and *The Invisible Man* (1933).¹⁶ In 1932, Karloff had expressed enthusiasm for the type of masquerade roles he was being asked to specialise in, calling this type of acting “a fascinating business.” As he commented:

It is my job to magnify that evil and make myself into a brute ... I have to put myself into the proper frame of mind for the role. I try to think myself a thing of evil, and let this thought consume me to the elimination of everything else. Only in this way can I manage to render a convincing impression of my screen personality before the camera.¹⁷

MGM’s decision to cast Karloff as the evil Chinese Fu Manchu is reminiscent of the casting of Lon Chaney as Chinese characters in several films in the 1920s, since Chaney – as discussed in the last chapter – was also an actor who specialised in playing disguised characters. According to Maurice, there was a tendency in western culture to depict the Oriental face as a mask in order to suggest the alien and “inscrutable” qualities of the stereotype.¹⁸ This racial mask dehumanises character and hides individuality. As Robert E. Park argues in an article entitled “Behind Our Masks”:

¹⁶ George T. Turner and Michael H. Price, “Behind *The Mask of Fu Manchu*: MGM serves up a fun-filled feast of depravity hosted by the megalomaniacal mandarin, memorably rendered by Boris Karloff,” *American Cinematographer* (January 1995), pp. 68-69.

¹⁷ “Stories of the Stages: Boris Karloff Fascinated by Characters he Plays,” *Daily Boston Globe* (13 November 1932).

¹⁸ Maurice, *The Cinema and Its Shadow*, p. 138.

The Oriental in America experiences a profound transfiguration in sentiment and attitude, but he cannot change his physical characteristics. He is still constrained to wear his racial uniform; he cannot, much as he may sometimes like to do so, cast aside the racial mask.¹⁹

Although the mask as a motif in *The Mask of Fu Manchu* does not literally mean the racial mask that Maurice and Park referred to in representing Oriental people in American films, the casting of Karloff and the procedure of physically transforming/“masking” him to become the character Fu Manchu demonstrated the importance of the idea of racialising Asian faces in American cinema at the time. In *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, moreover, Karloff’s previous successful masquerade character seems to have influenced his characterisation of Fu Manchu, suggesting an association between the Chinese villain and the famous monster Karloff had already played on screen—Frankenstein.



(Figure 3.1: Karloff as the monster in *Frankenstein* [1931])²⁰(Figure 3.2: Karloff as the mummy in *The Mummy*

¹⁹ Maurice, *The Cinema and Its Shadow*, pp. 138-139 For more information about Robert E. Park’s work, see “Behind Our Masks,” *Race and Culture*, vol. 1 of *The Collected Papers of Robert Ezra Park* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1950), pp. 246-47.

²⁰ James Whale, *Frankenstein* (Universal Pictures, 1931).

[1932])²¹



(Figure 3.3: Karloff as the villain in *The Old Dark House* [1932])²² (Figure 3.4: Karloff in *The Mask of Fu Manchu*)

Karloff was tall and thin with a rough-hewn facial profile. This appearance, together with Karloff's acclaimed expertise in playing horrifying characters, brought his Fu Manchu closer to the original descriptions of the character in Rohmer's original fiction:

Imagine a person, tall, lean and feline, high-shouldered, with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan, a close-shaven skull, and long, magnetic eyes of the true cat-green. Invest him with all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect, with all the resources, if you will of a wealthy government. Imagine that awful being, and you have a mental picture of Dr Fu-Manchu, the yellow peril incarnate in one man.²³

The creation of a cinematic Chinese was a joint effort from, at least, writers, director, actor, and styling/makeup team, all of who would have their own (not necessarily accurate)

²¹ Karl Freund, *The Mummy* (Universal Pictures, 1932).

²² James Whale, *The Old Dark House* (Universal Pictures, 1932).

²³ Sax Rohmer, *The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu* (New York: Dover, 1997 [originally published in 1913]), p. 13.

perceptions about China and Chinese people. Make-up artist Cecil Holland was in charge of designing the look for Fu Manchu in *The Mask of Fu Manchu*. As mentioned in the last chapter, Holland was very influential in the field at this time. In his book *The Art of Make-up for Stage & Screen*, Holland introduced many make-up techniques for creating a “Chinese” look, including using fish skin in the corners of eyes and wrapping clear tape around the head. He also believed that “false teeth add greatly to a Chinese and Negro make-up, to make the lips protrude.”²⁴ Interestingly, Warner Oland, who was famous for his characterisation of the Chinese detective Charlie Chan, never required elaborate yellow-face makeup. “I owe my Chinese appearance to the Mongol invasion,” claimed Oland himself, implying that he had inherited his “oriental” features from his Russian mother.²⁵ For *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, however, Holland put huge efforts into turning Karloff into an “authentic” Chinese – in doing so, he had to remould Karloff’s face with putty and prosthetic cosmetics because, Holland reasoned, Chinese eyes are set differently in the skull to those of Europeans. Additionally, he gave Karloff a pair of thin eyebrows, made his nose bigger, reshaped him with long fingernails and pointing ears and, more importantly, endowed him with the iconic moustache, which is still recognised today as a “Fu-Manchu moustache.” As Holland himself claimed, he added “the Mephisto effect necessary for so malign a characterization.”²⁶

The story of *The Mask of Fu Manchu* begins with archaeologist Sir Lionel Barton (Lawrence Grant) discovering the tomb of Genghis Khan and deciding to collect the relics—a mask and a sword—for academic and scientific purposes. Sir Denis Nayland Smith (Lewis Stone), a famous detective, warns Sir Lionel that the megalomaniacal Fu Manchu (Karloff) is also after the relics and volunteers to join the expedition. Should Fu Manchu find the

²⁴ Maurice, *The Cinema and Its Shadow*, p. 137.

²⁵ Huang, *Charlie Chan: the Untold Story of the Honorable Detective and His Rendezvous with American History*, p. 3186 (Kindle version).

²⁶ “Orientals Made to Order,” *American Cinematographer* (December 1932), p.16, mentioned in Turner and Price’s article “Behind *The Mask of Fu Manchu*,” p. 72.

artefacts, he will proclaim himself as the reincarnation of Genghis Khan and start a racial war against white civilisation with a pan-Asiatic army to do his bidding. While Sir Denis and Sir Lionel are secretly recruiting scientists at the British Museum, the latter is kidnapped and brought to Fu Manchu's underground palace. Sir Lionel is both offered bribes and then tortured to provide the location of the tomb, but he refuses to say a word. In order to rescue Sir Lionel, his daughter Sheila (Karen Morley) and her fiancé, Terrence Granville (Charles Starrett), join the expedition to the edge of Gobi Desert, successfully collect the mask and sword of Genghis Khan, and send a pair of replicas to Fu Manchu in exchange for Sir Lionel. The evil Chinese mastermind, however, realises the fraudulence of the relics, becomes enraged and retaliates by murdering Sir Lionel and capturing Terrence.

Fah Lo See (Myrna Loy), Fu Manchu's daughter, subsequently takes Terrence into custody, stripping and flogging him for punishment. The young man is later brainwashed by Fu Manchu and manipulated to trick the expedition team into a trap, bringing with them the genuine mask and sword. The climax of the story is when Sheila is brought before a hall full of Oriental chieftains as a human sacrifice in order to baptise the sword. Fu Manchu exults to the horde: "Would you all have maidens like this for your wives? Then conquer and breed! Kill the white man and take his women!" The chieftains respond to him with hysteria. In the nick of time, Terrence (who has now recovered his senses) and Sir Denis show up – they save Sheila, kill Fu Manchu, and wipe out all his Asian followers with a death ray machine invented by Fu Manchu originally to exterminate white civilisation. On the hero's and heroine's way home, they decide to throw Genghis Khan's sword into the sea to avoid it bringing any further trouble to the West.

In the original novels and Oland's trilogy, Fu Manchu is actually presented as an anti-war and anti-imperialist character, who is only finally driven insane by the destruction of his

family.²⁷ Karloff as Fu Manchu, on the other hand, according to reviewer John Scott, “is cold, relentless and diabolical—a much different portrayal of the character than that previously done by Warner Oland.”²⁸ The anti-foreign bias of Fu Manchu is maximised in Karloff’s version, while the victimised and sympathetic side of him is completely omitted. He has now become a deliriously belligerent and racist villain, who wants to accumulate an aggressive force to invade the West – this time an imperialistic endeavour launched by the *East* upon the West in the film.

Some reviewers, however, noted that British imperialism was also implicitly critiqued in the film. The British are shown as equally covetous as Fu Manchu himself of the artefacts, though their desire is disguised as “scientific” interest. “Bring these pretty things back to England,” as Barton excitedly declares before departing for Genghis Khan’s tomb. Critic Isaac Anderson commented that “the enterprise upon which Fu Manchu is engaged is essentially no more dishonourable than that of Sir Lionel Barton, the eminent Orientalist, who is trying to smuggle sacred relics out of Persia.”²⁹ In addition, Sir Denis and Sir Lionel are shown recruiting expedition members in the British Museum — an iconic location that displays Britain’s imperialistic past. The film’s director, Charles Brabin, was proud of the reproduction of the museum in the film, telling the press that “technicians copied almost everything in the British Museum, from mummies to pterodactyl.” Many of these artefacts and antiques, of course, had been expropriated by Britain from a variety of sources, including its colonies.³⁰ In this sense, the sequence in which Fu Manchu’s minions jump out of mummy cases in the museum and abduct Sir Lionel can be read as a form of retaliation of the once-exploited to their colonisers. By parading the spoils of war and empire (the museum

²⁷ Turner and Price, “Behind *The Mask of Fu Manchu*,” p. 71.

²⁸ John Scott, “Thriller on Two Screens: ‘Mask of Fu Manchu’ Opens at United Artists and Pantages; Boris Karloff Heads Cast,” *Los Angeles Times* (10 December 1932).

²⁹ Isaac Anderson, “New Mystery Stories,” *The New York Times* (27 November 1932).

³⁰ Turner and Price, “Behind *The Mask of Fu Manchu*,” p. 71.

collections) of Britain in the film and showing British characters expressing their craving for more relics from the Orient, the West is itself presented in a greedy and questionable light, though it is not comparable to the evilness of its eastern counterpart.

Traditionally in western culture, according to Harold Issacs, there are two dominant images relating to China and the Chinese – that of Marco Polo and Genghis Khan. To foreground the unsympathetic and aggressive sides of the Chinese in *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, the film-makers made direct references to Genghis Khan, whose mask and sword are highlighted as the means through which the villain aims to proclaim himself as the King of the Orient. Many film critics picked up this reference and commented on the ideas behind it. For example, *The Hartford Courant* noted that in the film,

torture chambers which would cause the dungeon keeps of the Middle Ages to pale in comparison are utilized by Fu Manchu in his desperate endeavor to outstrip a group of determined British scientists in a race to discover the lost tomb of Genghis Khan and to take from it the sword and golden mask of the great Asiatic leader ... Fu wants these trinkets because in his hands they will become the symbol of a tremendous Asiatic uprising.³¹

The memory of the great Mongolian tribesmen expanding their territory all the way to Europe has deep roots in western culture and can always be mobilised when there is a need to remind westerners about the barbarism of the Orient. In *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, however, the Chinese are dangerous not only because they are cruel and barbaric—Fu Manchu is actually depicted mastering western knowledge, surpassing that of all the actual western characters: “I’m a Doctor of Philosophy from Edinburgh, I’m a Doctor of Law from Christ’s College, I’m a Doctor of Medicine from Harvard.” As he demands of Sir Denis: “My friend,

³¹ “Fu Manchu Film. Tops Palace Bill: Double Program of Murder and Mystery Pictures with ‘No Living Witness’ Co-Featured,” *The Hartford Courant* (28 November 1932).

out of courtesy, call me Doctor.” Fu Manchu is shown as familiar with the rules of both the East and the West and possesses knowledges of both the Old and New Worlds. As Isaac Anderson described it, Fu Manchu was an undefeatable “superman who possesses all the wisdom of the East and the West, together with some exclusive tricks of his own.”³² In the sequence in which Fu Manchu operates on Terrence to control his mind, the Chinese villain wears a white coat and face mask and uses surgical instruments like a western doctor. However, he mixes this scientific procedure with, supposedly, Asian black magic—he injects a mixture of snake venom, a tarantula and “dragon blood” into Terrence’s body to make him an extension of Fu Manchu’s will.

This pseudo-scientific “operation” is a bold fantasy created by the film’s writers – as Thomas Doherty puts it “Fu’s work station is a cross between Merlin’s cave and an MIT laboratory.”³³ It suggests that Fu Manchu is powerful and undefeatable because of his omniscience. It also reflects western anxiety about being too ignorant of the East and, at the same time, the fear that the West itself has been completely understood by the East. Such fear is demonstrated especially through the scenes showing Fu Manchu’s utilisation of and fixation on electricity—a western discovery and technological development. For instance, the introductory scene of Fu Manchu is a close-up shot of him and his distorted reflection from a convex mirror with an electronic flickering sound in the background. Later in the film, he is shown to invent a death-ray machine, and he uses an electronic device to detect the falseness of the fake sword. All of these representations suggest Fu Manchu has an expertise in science and engineering with which none of the western scientists in the film can compare. From the perspective of film studies, according to Ruth Mayer, the picture’s emphasis on Fu Manchu and electricity is also metaphoric—it suggests the villain’s power “emanating from the

³² Anderson, “New Mystery Stories.”

³³ Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, p. 270.

‘generator’ of the figure which then enters intricate circuits and lines of transmission.”³⁴ As an ambitious villain who endeavours to take control of the whole of Asia and defeat the West, Fu Manchu is thus comparable to a an evil powerhouse that constantly disseminates insidious signals and energy, through his secret Chinese networks, to the rest of Asia.



(Figure 3.5: Fu Manchu and his death ray machine)

Besides the portrayal of the character Fu Manchu per se, a more general overview of the film would see it as emphasising an East-West binary and the incompatibility of the two in terms of aesthetics, religion and, more importantly, social and moral norms. The film expresses in particular the idea that racism is common to both sides. For example, while Sir Lionel compares Fu Manchu to a venomous snake and Sheila calls him a “hideous yellow monster,” the Chinese villain also makes derogatory reference to Terrence as “son of a white dog.” In addition, when Fah Lo See shows her attraction to Terrence and asks her father “he is not entirely unhandsome, is he, my father?”, Fu Manchu replies “for a white man, no.” All

³⁴ Mayer, “Image Power,” p. 408.

of these sequences indicate that contempt exists on both sides of the racial divide towards one another. At the same time, however, the film tries to send out a scary message to the white audience, exploiting traditional Orientalism, which feminises the East as subordinate to the West, by showing a powerful Orient attempting to conquer the western world.

In addition to Fu Manchu's aggressive plan to invade the West, the film boldly exaggerates the "Dragon Lady" characterisation of Fu Manchu's daughter, transforming Fah Lo See, the originally "quixotically romantic figure" in the book series, into a sadistically dominant and manipulative character as shown in her relationship with Terrence.³⁵ The sequence of Terrence being lashed by Fah Lo See is presented with an erotic charge – he is shown stripped and flogged by two black men while Fah Lo See excitedly yells "Faster! Faster! Faster! Faster!" After Terrence is beaten unconscious and before Fu Manchu appears, she takes him to her bedroom and lasciviously caresses his torso and kisses him. The erotic sequences of Fah Lo See and Terrence is shocking not only for its disturbing sadistic quality but also for the presentation of a white male being sexually exploited by a Chinese woman—white masculinity is thus shown being seriously challenged by the Chinese. In the end, when Fu Manchu commands his followers to "kill the white man and take his women", and the Asian chieftains become hysterical, reaching out their hands to Sheila, the white heroes appear, saving the white woman and eliminating the Asiatic hordes. Only then, near its end, does the film return to the conventional notion of Orientalism, showing white men defeating alien men, offering a reassuring view of western patriarchal dominance of the world to its audience. Such a last-minute reversal is unconvincing and fails to erase the humiliation wrought upon the white characters in the earlier part of the film. As critic D. K. sarcastically argued, "in the course of many books and pictures, Fu has slaughtered hundreds of minor characters, but sad to say, he has never yet scotched a single hero or a heroine, no matter how

³⁵ Richards, *China and the Chinese in Popular Film*, p. 42.

stupid. At the last moment we have come to know the protecting hand of the author will snatch them from Fu's clutches" and magically kill the evil master, though everyone knows that he will come back as new in the next sequel.³⁶



(Figure 3.6: Fah Lo See fondling Terry after he is flogged unconscious)

As a Pre-Production Code Administration production, both censor boards and the MPPDA found the film objectionable in its presentations of cruelty—the film includes scenes of torments for white characters involving horror elements such as cobras and alligators. However, there was little attention actually paid to foreign and racial sensitivities – the misrepresentations of the Chinese, blacks, and other Asian characters in the film were not matters for concern to the censors and representatives of the MPPDA. Amongst sixty-two

³⁶ D. K., "Deceptions Opens as Feature Film at New Theater: Nat Pendleton Seen as Football Star Who Turns Wrestler—The Mask of Fu Manchu Appears at Stanley," *The Baltimore Sun* (6 November 1932).

pages of archived censorship documents relating to the production of *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, only two pages refer to possible objections from the Chinese, and such objections were considered insignificant by the producers. They did not see the monstrosity of Fu Manchu and his daughter depicted in the film as an insult to Chinese people—director Brabin was even quoted as claiming that “the picture is literally a course in archaeology, Oriental religion, history and modern engineering rolled into one.”³⁷ Because of the tiny proportion of revenues contributed by China to the world market and the marginalised social status of Chinese immigrants in the US at this time, the possible feelings of Chinese people were rarely treated seriously by the American movie industry. The Chinese, along with the exotic elements in the film, were merely used as stimuli to excite audiences. As reviewer John Scott remarked, *The Mask of Fu Manchu* was a film attraction “because of weird torture apparatus, electrical doo-dats that sputter and crackle, snakes, crocodiles, and the presence of the leering, maniacal Fu Manchu”, which, altogether, “takes its place right at the head of the list of horror pictures of a horror cinema season.”³⁸ The film depicted the Oriental world as a bizarre, uncanny, and sensual phenomenon, frozen in time, just like the immortal Fu Manchu himself. This otherworldliness was the most recognisable feature of the East presented in American cinema, and it would be perpetuated in Hollywood pictures about China throughout the 1930s.

Intriguingly, although the fanciful representations of the East in the film were clearly meant to be understood as fictional, some concerns were raised by censors about the “realness” of the story and characters. Irwin Esmond, Director of New York Censor Board, for example, was worried that the audience was encouraged to believe what the film had to say. Esmond reasoned:

³⁷ Turner and Price, “Behind *The Mask of Fu Manchu*,” p. 71.

³⁸ Scott, “Thriller on Two Screens”.

The producer had done everything in the world to give an air of reality to the audience. People tortured are present day people starting out from the British Museum, which is an actuality, on an expedition to investigate what is in fact an old tomb. This also is a common occurrence these days. The principal villain is represented as a graduate with a doctor's degree from present day institutions of learning and it is not until you stop to think that you realize that the story must necessarily be more or less of a fairy tale. The trouble with this type of picture is that there are so many people in the audience that get the full effect of the horrors without realising the fantastical part of the tale.³⁹

There is no easy way to prove to what extent *The Mask of Fu Manchu* convinced its contemporary audience and shaped their views towards real Chinese/Asian people. However, it is evident that MGM, similar to its publicity strategy used for the film *Mr. Wu*, promoted the idea to the public that many aspects concerning Chinese people in *The Mask of Fu Manchu* were accurate, especially Karloff's characterisation of the Chinese villain. In the studio's pressbook, it is claimed that Karloff's knowledge of China assisted him in playing the part:

When Boris Karloff studied Chinese customs at the University of London with a consular career in view, he never thought this knowledge would be put to use in creating a screen role. But as Dr. Fu Manchu, the actor found his early knowledge of immeasurable help in effecting the more subtle nuances of the mysterious Chinese character...⁴⁰

³⁹ "Memorandum for Mr. Hunt Stromberg, Re: Mask of Fu Manchu," 12 November 1932, *The Mask of Fu Manchu* file, PCA files.

⁴⁰ "Boris Karloff's Knowledge of Chinese Aided Him in New Film Role," MGM Pressbook for *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, BFI Reuben Library.

“My father, who was in the Indian Civil Service, intended me for a consular career,” Karloff mentioned in an interview included in the pressbook, and “it was with this future in view that I enrolled in King’s College, University of London. Insomuch as I was to go to China, I specialised in Chinese customs and languages.”⁴¹ This information was included in the pressbook by MGM in their attempt to convince potential movie-goers that the film was worth watching because it incorporated considerable “authenticity,” including the principal actor’s expertise in Chinese culture and the company’s own investment in “recreating” the British Museum. In so doing, however, the studio tried to persuade the public that the fantasised China and Chinese in the film were somehow authentic and reflected reality. It was this sense of “realness” that troubled some censors.

The Mask of Fu Manchu did not impress many reviewers after its release. It is possible that the public had become relatively over-exposed to the franchise after four Fu Manchu films had been released since 1929 (plus a revue called *Paramount on Parade*, in which Oland appeared as Fu Manchu). For example, critic D. K. described Karloff in the film as “looking every inch the Russian, in spite of false eyebrows, long whiskers and mandarin dress” and reviewer Mae Tinee criticised Karloff because he “declaims his awful utterances with gusto and a slight lisp and appears to have had a hard time keeping his face straight.”⁴² After the unsatisfactory reception of *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, the film franchise temporarily came to an end. It would not be revived for many years. However, the total number of films about China and the Chinese was about to increase considerably.

There was never one definitive reason why Hollywood began to pay more attention to China as a theme from the early 1930s onwards. However, several things were happening

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² D. K., “Deception Opens As Feature Film At New Theatre; Mae Tinee, “Dr. Fu Manchu Loose Again; Packs Theater: Sax Rohmer Character Up to Dirty Work,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (2 December 1932).

simultaneously in this period that might have contributed to Hollywood's awakening recognition of China as a workable backcloth for movies. Firstly, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the financial pressures of the Great Depression forced producers and screenwriters to be additionally creative and willing to exploit any subject that had the potential to make good returns. Also, when a particular film was successful at the box office, studios tended to produce other films with similar story-lines and backcloths in order to replicate previous financial success. Film cycles began to form when people went to see these films. Well-known film cycles from the early 1930s included gangster films, musicals, and screwball comedies. As American sociologist Herbert Gans once noted, "the audience is obviously limited by what is offered, but what is offered to it depends a good deal on what it has accepted previously."⁴³ Therefore, one possible reason for the increasing number of films about China was that certain China-themed films (e.g., *Shanghai Express* [1932]) performed well at the box office, with others following in the hope of repeating that commercial success.

Secondly, it had been believed since the late 1920s that Hollywood films were able to stimulate consumption of American commodities and acceptance of the American way of life in other countries – that they could be an effective tool in encouraging America's economic expansion across the world. The director of the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce (BFDC), Dr. Julius Klein, who was also an economic historian of Spain and Latin America, expressed this belief in his testimony before a congressional committee in 1926, arguing that motion pictures helped the US build better understanding and commercial relationships with Latin America. When he was asked about whether films could bring similar influence to bear on China, Klein claimed that,

[the motion picture] is invaluable in all markets where there is a high percentage of

⁴³ Quoted in Bergman, *We're in the Money*, p. xvi.

illiteracy among the people, for from the pictures they see they get their impressions of how we live, the clothes we wear, and so forth. In fact there has been a complete change in the demand for commodities in dozens of countries, I can cite you instances of the expansion of trade in the Far East, traceable directly to the effects of the motion picture.⁴⁴

Chinese movie-theatres in the 1920s and 30s were mainly in big cities, especially located in the “foreign enclaves” in China, for example the International Settlement in Shanghai and portal cities like Canton, where people had access to a wide range of imported goods from America and Europe. Although the annual revenue generated from the Chinese film market was minimal compared to that from the UK or other European countries, the long-established American belief in the promise of a “China market” with four hundred million customers made China seem a huge mercantile opportunity. This encouraged more China-themed films to be produced in the 1930s to reach out to a wider range of Chinese audiences.

Thirdly, Japan invaded China in 1931, an event that was well-publicised in American newspapers. It was not difficult for Hollywood to realise that people’s growing interest in international affairs (especially in an era when the public had only limited sources of information) could be utilised for its own benefit. Many feature films produced about China from 1932 onward were set in the Chinese Warlord Era (1916-1928) or the Chinese Civil War Era to add dramatic effect. Though the Sino-Japanese War itself was often not directly foregrounded in these films, the overall representation of a chaotic and politically unstable China coincided with the growing newspaper coverage of the country and made such cinematic representation of China seem increasingly relevant to 1930s American movie-goers.

Shanghai Express (1932) is, in many ways, a representative Hollywood film of the

⁴⁴ Quoted in Trumpbour, *Selling Hollywood to the World*, p.64.

early 1930s about China. As a pre-Production Code Administration production, *Shanghai Express* contained some boldly suggestive sequences (for instance, the female protagonist's memorable line in the film: "it took more than one man to change my name to Shanghai Lily"), which would not be permitted in films produced after the arrival of the PCA in 1934. *Shanghai Express* was also another promising collaboration between director Josef von Sternberg and famous star Marlene Dietrich after their earlier successful productions, such as *The Blue Angel* (1930), *Morocco* (1930), and *Dishonored* (1931).⁴⁵ The film became the highest-grossing film of 1932, amidst all the turmoil created by the Depression. The success of the film heralded the emergence of a distinct "Chinese warlord" film cycle in the following years.

Josef von Sternberg's Fantasised Shanghai and Chinese Banditry in *Shanghai Express*

On 28 January 1932, the Shanghai Incident took place in the Shanghai International Settlement (an area under control of Britain and the United States), starting with anti-Japanese demonstrations against Japan's invasion of Manchuria, which was followed by Japan's bombardment of Shanghai as response. At the time, many foreign interests were involved in Shanghai and a coalition of western countries, including the US, Britain and France, attempted to negotiate a truce with Japan during February. Yet the peace plan proposed was rejected by the Japanese empire, which mobilised more troops to be sent to Shanghai. The fighting in the city attracted much attention on the world stage – for example, major American newspapers in the US were flooded with news coverage of Shanghai issues, including the entire negotiating process between western countries and Japan. A journalist reporting from Tokyo in 1932 for *The Atlanta Constitution*, for example, commented that

⁴⁵ Josef von Sternberg, *The Blue Angel* (UFA, 1930); Josef von Sternberg, *Morocco* (Paramount Pictures, 1930); Josef von Sternberg, *Dishonored* (Paramount Pictures, 1931).

“Japan will inform the great powers [on 4th February] that she is unable to accept their proposals to settle the conflict at Shanghai ... the [Japanese] foreign minister declared Japan never could agree to outside intervention in Sino-Japanese negotiations over the Shanghai and Manchurian questions.”⁴⁶

In mid-February, according to another report from *The Christian Science Monitor* (a Massachusetts publication), Britain managed to secure a pause during the fighting and evacuate thousands of refugees in Shanghai from the area in which fighting was taking place to the safer international districts.⁴⁷ Later in March, *The New York Times* reported the losses and casualties (as claimed by the Shanghai Bureau of Social Affairs) during the fighting:

A total of 6,080 Chinese civilians were killed, more than 2,000 were wounded and 10,040 are missing as a result of the Sino-Japanese hostilities in Chapei, Kiangwan and Woosung ... in addition, 160,000 Chinese families were driven from their homes, most of the homes being ruined, entailing building damages of 1,400,000,000 silver dollars, which is about \$350,000,000 in gold.⁴⁸

More and more detailed information about the Sino-Japanese conflict kept appearing in American newspapers, making the general public more familiar with the city of Shanghai while at the same time revealing its chaotic situation and tragic plight. Against this historical background, the film *Shanghai Express* was released in the US, its appearance synchronising

⁴⁶ “Chinese Claim of Sinking Destroyer Denied by Japanese; Cannons in Shanghai Silent after Long Bombardment: Wild Shells Land Near U. S. Craft, Tokyo Balks at Manchurian Arbitration Clause; Force of Italy’s Troops Leaves for Shanghai,” *The Atlanta Constitution* (4 February 1932).

⁴⁷ “Trapped Civilians to Escape in 4-Hour Truce at Shanghai: British Initiate Halt in Fighting to Aid Thousands of Refugees—Japanese Says Fatal Bombing in Foreign Quarter was Unintentional,” *The Christian Science Monitor* (11 February 1932).

⁴⁸ Hallett Abend, “Japanese General Foresees Trouble: Tells the Returning Shanghai Troops to be Ready ‘When Things Happen’, Chinese Forces Gather, Heavy Concentration on Front West of Shanghai—Shantung War Lord Breaks with Loyang,” *The New York Times* (17 March 1932), p. 8.

with massive international attention being paid to China at the time. As critic Edwin Schallert noted in 1932 in the *Los Angeles Times*: “with Shanghai in the world spotlight the Paramount organization loses no time in bringing ‘Shanghai Express’ to filmdom’s marts of trade. And that’s enterprise.”⁴⁹ Although the film was not set against the specific background of the existing Sino-Japan war, it did hinge on the overall disturbances involved in the Chinese Civil War that began in 1927 (and would continue at varying levels of intensity until 1949).

The film begins with passengers boarding a train leaving from Beijing to Shanghai. They include the protagonists – a British army officer Captain Donald “Doc” Harvey (Clive Brook) and “a notorious white flower of China,” the courtesan Shanghai Lily (Marlene Dietrich). Other characters include: a Chinese prostitute Hui Fei (Anna May Wong); a mysterious Eurasian man Henry Chang – the villain of the film, played by Warner Oland, who had played the role of Fu Manchu in four films by 1932; Reverend Carmichael (Lawrence Grant); a fussy old lady Mrs. Haggerty (Louise Closser Hale); and gambler Sam Salt (Eugene Pallette). As the train pulls out of the station, we see the railroad track is built in the middle of a very crowded and marketplace-like environment, in which folksy Chinese people and farm animals are parading along the tracks, with houses and shops only few steps away.

This shot of an over-populated street is very reminiscent of some late-nineteenth century caricatures and photographic images of Chinatowns in the US. In a letter written in 1937 by Colonel Frederick L. Herron, head of the foreign department of the MPPDA, describing Hollywood’s limitations in presenting Chinese people and the Chinese environment, he pointed out that many stereotypical ideas about China had been perpetuated from Americans’ early impressions about the heavily-congested sections where Chinese

⁴⁹ Edwin Schallert, “‘Shanghai Express’ Rushed to Theatre Screens,” *Los Angeles Times* (29 Jan 1932).

immigrants lived in the US – the so-called “Chinatowns”, especially the ones located in Sacramento and San Francisco, California.⁵⁰ The Chinese people Herron referred to in his letter were all without exception Cantonese from certain districts of the Guangdong Province of China. As he wrote:

Of the 50,000 or 60,000 Chinese in the State of California during those years, probably 99% were of the illiterate, peasant, labor classes of South China and were generally employed as day laborers, servants, laundry men, gardeners, and small Chinese goods shopkeepers.⁵¹

Such an impression of the Chinese as a whole had been well captured and reflected in the opening scene of *Shanghai Express*. In Sternberg’s own description of the scene: “A China was built of papier mâché and into it we placed slanted-eyed men, women, and children, who seemed to relish being part of it.”⁵²

⁵⁰ Frederick L. Herron to Joseph I. Breen, 16 April 1937, *Shanghai Express* file, PCA files, Margaret Herrick Library.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Josef von Sternberg, *Fun in a Chinese Laundry* (London: Columbus, 1987), p. 262.



(Figure 3.7: The shot of the “Shanghai Express” driving across downtown Beijing in the film)



(Figure 3.8: “Parade in Chinatown, 1932”)⁵³



(Figure 3.9: “Chinatown in San Francisco, 1926”)⁵⁴

⁵³ A photo of a parade in the Chinatown in New York City in 1932, retrieved from Bridgeman Education: <https://www-bridgemaneducation-com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/en/asset/3009046/summary>

⁵⁴ A photo of the Chinatown in San Francisco in 1926, retrieved from Bridge Education: <https://www-bridgemaneducation-com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/en/asset/3014080/summary>



(Figure 3.10: A drawing of Chinatown, San Francisco by John William Joseph Winkler, 1920)⁵⁵

During the opening sequence, the train is shown being obstructed by a cow suckling its calf in the middle of the railway, ignoring the puffing locomotive and the clanging bells. Reverend Carmichael grumpily asks Chang “can you tell me what’s wrong now?”, and the Eurasian Chang answers “you are in China now, sir, where time and life have no value.” This image of China as a place full of mysteries and chaos spoke significantly to many western people’s impressions about the country at this time. Reviewer Mae Tinee remarked in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* that “the train pulls out amid a fascinating pictorial and sound olio of local color. You may never have seen a train leave a Chinese depot, but you’re sure that the departure of the ‘Shanghai Express’ is a picture truly drawn.”⁵⁶ Such a statement suggests

⁵⁵ John William Joseph Winkler, “Awnings and Balconies, Chinatown, San Francisco”, 1920. Picture retrieved from: <https://art.famsf.org/john-william-joseph-winkler/awnings-and-balconies-chinatown-san-francisco-19633038560>

⁵⁶ Mae Tinee, “‘Shanghai Express’ is Excellent Melodrama and Well Acted,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (18 February 1932).

that the depiction of the Peking station in the film fulfilled the contemporary audience's imagination of China (based on impressions about Chinatowns), reinforcing in many people's minds the notion that the fantasised images presented in *Shanghai Express* was actually the "real" China. According to Jeffrey Richards, "*Shanghai Express* was perhaps the most influential film in establishing Hollywood's view of China during the 1930s."⁵⁷ Indeed, many elements in the film (for example, the city of Shanghai itself, the express train, the bandit abduction, etc.) were repeatedly shown in other 1930s and 40s feature films about China.

However, as exhilarating as the filmic images may have been, there was almost nothing in that fantastic opening scenes that was in any sense authentic. Von Sternberg had never been to China before making *Shanghai Express*, meaning his presentation of the fascinating scene at Peking station was fabricated from his own imagination. After the release of the film, the Chinese Nationalist government expressed anger about this depiction of their nation and, for the first time in history, banned all Paramount productions in China. The ban was only lifted with the help of the United States Embassy with the promise that the company would not make any pictures offensive to the Chinese in the future.⁵⁸ Von Sternberg himself was also told that if he ever went to China, he would be arrested and punished for his production of *Shanghai Express*. However, some years later he managed to enter China and had the chance to take a real Shanghai Express from Beijing. Ironically, the train *was* briefly delayed by a bandit faction (as happens in the film) but, other than that, the trip was not as fanciful as portrayed in his film. "The actual Shanghai Express", as Sternberg himself described, "was thoroughly unlike the train I had invented, except that it, too, carried a protecting complement of armed military. I was more than pleased that I had delineated a China before being confronted with its vast and variegated reality. There is quite a difference between fact and

⁵⁷ Richards, *China and the Chinese in Popular Films*, p. 106.

⁵⁸ Herron to Breen, 16 April 1937, *Shanghai Express* file, PCA files.

fancy.”⁵⁹

Nine years after *Shanghai Express*, when Sternberg had actually experienced the real China, he made another feature film – *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941) – which, again, depicted Shanghai as an exciting, sensual, and even timeless place for westerners to gaze at.⁶⁰ The director’s ten-year fixation on portraying China in a similar way underlines, to some extent, the unchanged nature of American fantasies about China throughout the era of the Great Depression. *The Shanghai Gesture* itself – as well as, more broadly, Hollywood directors’ fetishism of Shanghai – will be discussed later in this chapter.

The story of *Shanghai Express*, according to its director, was loosely based on a one-page story of a bandits’ hold-up written by Harry Hervey.⁶¹ Von Sternberg changed the background to that of the Chinese Civil War in 1927 and made Henry Chang, the villain of the film, a rebel leader against the Chinese Nationalist government. Unfortunately, the lack of details and the seeming complexity of Chang’s character made him into a bandit, warlord, and Communist at the same time — creating a very generalised Chinese villain. In the film, for example, after Chang’s faction takes control of the locomotive, he executes a man who has been rude to him earlier, robs Sam Salt of his brooch, forces himself on Hui Fei and compels Shanghai Lily to become his mistress. Nothing about Chang’s own political stance or China’s political struggle is ever explained in the film. Chang is rather a rebellious figure who opposes the legitimate Chinese government for no rational reason and abuses his power to fulfil his own desires – a demonstration of regional banditry (a “Robber Baron”) as outlined in the original story.

It is also worth noting that the character Chang is a biracial man (half-white, half-Chinese) who, though he looks more like a white man, is “not proud of [his] white blood.” In

⁵⁹ Sternberg, *Fun in a Chinese Laundry*, pp. 263-64.

⁶⁰ Josef von Sternberg, *The Shanghai Gesture* (United Artists, 1941).

⁶¹ Sternberg, *Fun in a Chinese Laundry*, p. 263.

a conversation with Chang, Salt expresses incomprehension at Chang's identity: "I can't make head or tail out of you, Mr. Chang. Are you Chinese or are you white, or what are ya?" Knowing Chang hates his white heritage, Salt comments that "What future is there being a Chinaman? You are born, eat your way through a handful of rice, and you die. What a country! Let's have a drink." Besides Salt's brief and stereotypical summary of a "Chinaman's" life trajectory, the character Chang embodies stereotypical Hollywood racial concerns going back to David W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). The villain's racial background suggests the depravity of miscegenation: that a biracial person (the result of miscegenation) is even more dangerous than a non-white. This idea would be further expanded nine years later in Von Sternberg's *The Shanghai Gesture*.

During the production of *Shanghai Express*, in fact, the MPPDA had advised Paramount several times to reconsider the presentations of the Chinese in the film, especially in terms of the conflicts shown between the Chinese government and the rebels. In a memorandum to Colonel Jason S. Joy, Director of Public Relations of the MPPDA, Lamar Trotti pointed out that the picture had a "foreign problem" because the bandits are depicted victorious over the legitimate Chinese government.⁶² Later in the same month, Joy wrote to Paramount suggesting the company seek some "authoritative Chinese opinion" regarding the presentations of the Chinese political struggles.⁶³ He also advised the studio to eliminate a scene showing "human heads hanging from poles in the Chinese street", which implied "the continuation of barbarous practices" in China – the scene, indeed, was deleted from the final picture.⁶⁴ Fred W. Beetsen, Executive Vice President of MPPDA, later wrote to Paramount again suggesting the studio show the finished picture to the Chinese minister, though he

⁶² Memorandum to Colonel Joy by Lamar Trotti, 18 September 1931, *Shanghai Express* file, PCA files.

⁶³ Jason S. Joy to B.P. Schulberg, 28 September 1931, *Shanghai Express* file, PCA files, p. 1.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

claimed his advice to be purely “a policy matter, the question of censorship abroad being the major consideration. It [did] not seem to [the MPPDA officers] that Chinese people [were] placed in an unfavorable light.”⁶⁵

The MPPDA’s opinion of the film, however, was not the same as that of the Chinese. The Chinese press showed itself infuriated by the presentation of their country in the film even before its official release. *Pictorial Weekly* published a translated article about *Shanghai Express* from a Chinese periodical in 1931:

Recently Paramount has made a picture showing the darkest side of Chinese politics. It is called, SHANGHAI EXPRESS, in which Anna May Wong plays the part of a contemptible Chinese prostitute. This picture has the Chinese revolution as its background, depicting a conspiracy between rebels and foreigners, and the entertainment of the latter in brothels.

The picture, when completed, will further expose all the evils of Chinese society, and as the Occidentals know very little of Chinese and always entertain a contempt for things Chinese the pictures always exaggerate the truth. If any Chinese character is included, he has to wear a queue and Chinese boots, long discarded. Where does one see such things nowadays except when dramas of a generation ago are presented on the stage? ... We hope the Chinese Minister in America will immediately file a protest with the Paramount Company.⁶⁶

Jason Joy subsequently contacted the studio with suggestions for it to show the final film to the Chinese officials (ideally “with an audience”), because they were very hopeful that the Chinese would appreciate the actual picture. It seemed to the MPPDA, according to Joy, that the studio had thoroughly respected the Chinese’s point of view.⁶⁷ “I am pretty sure,” Joy

⁶⁵ Fred W. Beetson to B. P. Shulberg, 8 October 1931, *Shanghai Express* file, PCA files.

⁶⁶ *Pictorial Weekly*, “Paramount Utilizes Anna May Wong to Produce Picture to Disgrace China,” 5 December 1931 [a translation of the article was published in this American magazine], *Shanghai Express* file, PCA files.

⁶⁷ Jason S. Joy to B. P. Schulberg, 21 January 1932, *Shanghai Express* file, PCA files.

claimed to Will Hays, “that Paramount has handled SHANGHAI EXPRESS, the new Marlene Dietrich picture, in a way that will please the Chinese, although we are planning to show it to the Chinese Consul General in order to make sure.”⁶⁸ All this confidence and preparation, however, did not prevent the film and Paramount from being banned by the Chinese government. It cannot be denied that both the studio and the MPPDA had made efforts to avoid ill feelings from the Chinese while making the film. However, America’s deeply-rooted stereotypes of China and its people in popular culture constructed over many decades failed to make the American film industry understand that the distorted and stereotypical images of China and the Chinese people they presented to the world were problematic and offensive to the Chinese. This misunderstanding had caused a vicious circle between Hollywood and China throughout the 1930s – on the one hand, film producers were getting more and more tired of (and, for some, eventually ceased) listening to Chinese officials, because it seemed impossible to present the Chinese in a way that both made sense to Americans and satisfied the Chinese; on the other hand, Chinese officials were equally frustrated that Hollywood kept producing the same stereotypes of China and the Chinese over and over again on film.

In spite of this episode with the Chinese government, *Shanghai Express* turned out to be a box-office triumph for Paramount, taking in a record 3.7 million dollars at the height of the Great Depression. The film was also praised by many film critics for the acting and its photographic achievement—especially for the presentation of a (fanciful) China. The *Daily Boston Globe* claimed the film “rose to the heights of film supremacy ... in those vivid, colourful confused scenes in the Peking Station”, demonstrating “the external realities of old and new China,” and that the director “has brought the panorama of life in China to the

⁶⁸ Jason S. Joy to Will Hays, 20 January 1932, *Shanghai Express* file, PCA files.

screen.”⁶⁹

Shanghai Express encouraged other producers, who were desperate to make profits during the nadir of the Great Depression, to produce similar pictures. Its adventure theme, the background of a war-torn China, and the presentation of a Chinese bandit/warlord as the villain all became signatures to be imitated and exploited by other film-makers. A review in *Variety*, for example, dismissed *Roar of the Dragon* (1932) as “just another Manchurian bandit story and extremely remindful of ‘Shanghai Express’ in more ways than one. Only it’s a boat this time instead of a train.”⁷⁰ Other warlord films produced in the following years included *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933), *The General Died at Dawn* (1936), *Roaming Lady* (1936), *Outlaws of the Orient* (1937), and *West of Shanghai* (also known as *Warlord*) (1937). Despite the fact that the Chinese government greatly resented this “warlord cycle” – and had protested against all the above-mentioned films even while they were still being made – studios carried on making them, amongst other things creating a new, well-known but short-lived Chinese male stereotype in Hollywood films: the merciless Chinese warlord.



(Figure 3.11: Chinese warlord Chang [right] played by Warner Oland in *Shanghai*

⁶⁹ “‘Shanghai Express’ at New Paramount,” *Daily Boston Globe* (26 February 1932).

⁷⁰ Wesley Ruggles, *Roar of the Dragon* (RKO, 1932); Bige., “Roar of the Dragon,” *Variety*, (2 August 1932).

Express)



(Figure 3.12: Chinese warlord Yen played by Nils Asther in *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* [1933])



(Figure 3.13: Chinese warlord Yang played by Akim Tamiroff in *The General Died at*

Dawn [1936])



(Figure 3.14: Chinese warlord Fang played by Boris Karloff in *The West of Shanghai* [1937])

Although there are often many reasons for a film cycle to begin, it will be argued here that the Chinese “warlord cycle” of the 1930s emerged in part at least because of growing criticism of capitalism in the United States as a result of the Great Depression. Matthew Josephson’s *The Robber Barons: The Great American Capitalists, 1861-1901*, a widely-read book published in 1934, focused on American tycoons in the Civil War and post-Civil War period (including Cornelius Vanderbilt, Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, and Jay Gould), many of who came from humble origins but were able to gain their enormous wealth and power in their fields aided by the great economic expansion of the US itself during and

after the Civil War.⁷¹ The term “Robber Barons” originated in Europe to describe the feudal landowners during the Middle Ages who imposed high taxation and tolls through their territories or else adopted banditry to rob cities in order to alleviate their own financial difficulties.⁷² Josephson compared the American tycoons to these “Robber Barons” and accused them of abusing their wealth to “[extend] their sway throughout the social order,” “[overrun] all the existing institutions which buttress society,” “[take] possession of the political government (with its police, army, navy), of the School, the Press, the Church; and finally ...[lay] hands upon the world of fashionable or polite society...”⁷³

Thanks in large part to Josephson’s book, these late-nineteenth-century American capitalists’ names, along with the term “Robber Barons,” became salient again in 1930s America, and they were juxtaposed with the social problems caused by the Great Depression. The popularity of the book in the 1930s revealed the prevalence of a questioning spirit towards capitalism/industrialism in American society during this era of economic turmoil. The Chinese warlords, often foregrounded as villains in the “warlord cycle” films, were indeed the Chinese version of “Robber Barons”, who expanded their wealth and regional influence using illegitimate means and unscrupulous methods. An article in *Los Angeles Times* blamed the warlords for China’s sufferings in 1933: “Each [warlord] has his own army. Collect[s] his own taxes” and “the weak government is powerless to deal with them. The lords keep their armies separated during major military operations like the Japanese invasion. Their hyena rule in Manchuria gave Japan her excuse.”⁷⁴

Many journalists in the 1930s made direct links between the Chinese warlords and

⁷¹ Matthew Josephson, *The Robber Barons: The Great American Capitalists, 1861-1901* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934).

⁷² Hilla Zmora, *State and Nobility in Early Modern Germany: The Knightly Feud in Franconia, 1440-1567* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 3.

⁷³ Josephson, *The Robber Barons*, p. 316.

⁷⁴ Harry Carr, “Two Wars, Three Governments, Millions Starving, Unite to Make China Hopeless,” *Los Angeles Times* (30 July 1933).

“Robber Barons” and compared the Chinese Warlord Era (1915-1928) to medieval Europe. In a news article reporting the assassination of Chang Tsung-Chang [张宗昌], the “basest war lord” of China, the author remarked that “to find the like of Chang Tsung-Chang you must go the annals of those mighty eaters and drinkers and lechers of north Europe, the robber barons of the Middle Ages.”⁷⁵ Journalist James H. Powers even directly called the Chinese War Lord Era the period of Robber Barons:

No nation in modern times has passed through such a protracted period of confusion and anarchy as China experienced between the demise of Yuan Shih Kai [in 1916] ... and the advent of Chiang Kai Shek [in 1928] ... Yet China, no more than Europe between the collapse of the Roman Empire in the 6th century and the emergence of the medieval organization of society in the 9th and 10th centuries, could avoid or evade that desolating experience.⁷⁶

Consequently, the emergence of the Chinese warlord cycle in 1930s Hollywood was opportune—on the one hand, the cycle coincided with news coverage of the actual Chinese warlords (e.g. Chang Tsung-Chang) and their fanciful stories, fulfilling the public’s curiosity about China. On the other hand, that resentment should exist towards these fictional “Robber-

⁷⁵ “China: Basest War Lord,” *Time* (7 March 1927). The author remarked in the article: “When Chang, a six-foot bandit chieftain, visited Peking, last winter, cultivated Chinese were shocked to see in his train as concubines some eighty young women seized by his soldiers from the richest fathers and husbands in Shantung province. Conscienceless and avaricious, Chang has farmed tribute out of this densely populated province until even the poorest have yielded all that could be seized.” Article retrieved from: <https://web.archive.org/web/20101125032834/http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,722931,00.html>; Captain John W. Thomason Jr., “The Passing of One of China’s Greatest Rascals: Marshall Chang Tsung-Chang, a Giant in Stature was Gargantuan Drinker, Ingenious Killer, and Relentless as a Robber Baron,” *The Hartford Courant* (18 December 1932).

⁷⁶ James H. Powers, “China’s Decade of Robber Barons: Asia in Ferment Part II—China’s March toward Democracy,” *Daily Boston Globe* (14 July 1937).

Baron"-style Chinese warlords in the films resonated very well with the prevalent social criticism of capitalism/industrialism in the Depression-era United States. The warlord cycle films, therefore, to some degree mirrored the historical situations in both China and the United States.

Atypical East-West Power Dynamics in *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933)

As reviewer Mae Tinee remarked in her review of *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (henceforth *Bitter Tea*) in 1933: it “looks as if the Chinese cycle has arrived.”⁷⁷ The 1930s was indeed a decade that saw an increasing number of films about China or centring on Chinese characters appearing in American cinemas. Similar to *Shanghai Express*, *Bitter Tea* was one of the timely productions of the “warlord cycle” during the time when the Sino-Japanese situation still attracted world attention. The film was produced by Columbia Pictures and adapted from Grace Zaring Stone’s 1930 novel with the same title, set against the background of the Chinese Civil War.⁷⁸ According to some film scholars, however, the ambiguous timeframe of the film version makes it also possible to interpret it as a story of the Sino-Japanese conflict that relates to Japan’s attack on Shanghai in 1932. David Palumbo-Liu argues that “[*Bitter Tea*] tries to exploit contemporary history while deleting actuality,” and one piece of evidence for the deliberately equivocal approach of the narrative of the film is that “there is a conspicuous absence of the words ‘Communist’ or ‘Japanese.’”⁷⁹ Another example is the sequence showing an air raid on Shanghai, which only happened in reality during the Japanese attack (never during the conflict between Nationalists and Communists).

⁷⁷ Frank Capra, *Bitter Tea of General Yen* (Columbia Pictures, 1933); Mae Tinee, “Nil Asher is Highlight of Chinese Story,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (15 January 1933).

⁷⁸ Grace Zaring Stone, *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap Group, 1930).

⁷⁹ Elizabeth Rawitsch, *Frank Capra’s Eastern Horizon: American identity and the Cinema of International Relations* (NY: I. B. Tauris, 2015), 74.

Elizabeth Rawitsch argues that these mixed signals were created intentionally in order to imply that the East, not the West, was a menace because the “barbaric attack” is done by “one part of the East on another.”⁸⁰

It is certainly possible to interpret the sequence in this way, but the most direct effect of mixing up the Chinese Civil War and the Sino-Japanese conflict, especially by (obscurely) hinting at Japan’s aggression in Shanghai using air raid footage, was to recreate something that would seem contemporary to early 1930s audiences without explicitly presenting the international conflict that was still in progress. It was Capra’s intention, after all, to make something timely, audacious, and preferably of “Oscar” award-winning quality. According to Capra himself in his autobiography, the main reason he made *Bitter Tea* in the first place was to impress the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences voters with something “arty.” He had previously directed a film entitled *American Madness* (1932), which was one of the first films directly and openly to deal with bank panics.⁸¹ Capra had believed that the film was timely and controversial, and that its reflection of real social anxieties would have attracted some votes for an Academy award. When he was told that the film was not “arty” enough to be award-winning material, he decided to make something edgier:

I dreamed about Oscars. I *had* to get one. Okay. If the Academy voted only for arty films (not true), I would make the artiest film they ever saw—about miscegenation! That ought to stir up some arty votes ...⁸²

By that time, Capra had already learned that Columbia Pictures was intending to make a film based on Stone’s *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, so he pleaded with producer Walter Wanger

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title: An Autobiography* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), p. 136.

⁸² Ibid., p. 140.

to let him direct the picture because the story shows how “representatives of two cultures as far apart as the poles, clash and fall in love.” It seemed the perfect material for him at that stage, offering something “arty” about miscegenation. As he later remarked “to me it was Art with a capital A.”⁸³

The film adaption of *Bitter Tea of General Yen* begins with the arrival of a young missionary, Megan Davis (Barbara Stanwyck), who has come from New England to Shanghai to marry her childhood sweetheart, Dr. Robert Strife (Gavin Gordon). However, their wedding is postponed because the couple decide to save some orphans stuck in the Chapei section of Shanghai, which is under attack because of the ongoing Chinese Civil War. After the couple finally send the children away in a rickshaw, both get knocked out by a Chinese man in the mob and then become separated. Finding the unconscious Megan in the street, the Chinese warlord General Yen (Nils Asther) decides to save/abduct her, and she is subsequently taken on board a train with him. During her captivity, the general falls in love with Megan while her attitude towards him also gradually changes. Although Megan keeps resisting her own feelings, it becomes more and more clear in the film that she is reciprocally attracted to him, even sexually (her erotic dream about the general was considered a controversial sequence when the film was originally released). Megan then becomes obsessed in the latter half of the film with converting Yen to Christianity, but the general’s luck runs out before she can succeed. Mah-Li (Tashio Mori), Yen’s disloyal concubine, betrays him and leaves him encircled by his enemies, but Yen decides to end his own life instead by drinking a cup of “bitter tea”, which is really poison. Megan is finally honest with her feelings and reveals her love to him before he dies. On her way back to Shanghai by boat, Yen’s American financial adviser Jones (Walter Connolly) comforts and tells her that all three of them may be able to meet again in the next life.

⁸³ Ibid.

“No picture half so strange, so bizarre, had ever before passed outward through the astonished doors of the Columbia Studio,” claimed reviewer Philip K. Scheuer, and he believed that the film was “compounded of elements as contradictory and irreconcilable as the east and west with which it deals.”⁸⁴ Since the film centres on a love story between a Chinese man and a white girl, many critics compared it to an earlier cinema success with the similar theme: *Broken Blossoms*. Scheuer claimed that *Bitter Tea* was the first film since *Broken Blossoms* to capture such “unerringly honest” a viewpoint of the oriental.⁸⁵ Another reviewer commented in the *Atlanta Constitution* that “Never since *Broken Blossoms* has a more poignant love story been screened than [*Bitter Tea*].”⁸⁶

However, being a much more complicated Chinese male character in a deliberately controversial film, the casting of the character Yen, according to Capra, was one of the most difficult choices he had to make during the production of the film. In the director’s imagination, Yen was a personable and attractive man, who was tall and lean. Claiming to have observed the Chinese thoroughly, however, Capra asserted – demonstrating considerable racial bias – that “there were no tall Chinese in casting directories, or even in laundries.” Nils Asther, a Swedish actor, was finally chosen for the role because he was not only tall, but “spoke with a slightly pedantic ‘book’ accent” and his face “promised [the] serenity and mystery of a centuries-old culture.”⁸⁷ Although Capra’s aim in making the film was to produce something bold and progressive about miscegenation, the casting of Yen revealed, from the very beginning, that the director was essentially unconvinced that a real Chinese

⁸⁴ Philip K. Scheuer, “East and West Meet Again: Oriental Story, ‘Bitter Tea of General Yen’ Opens with Barbara Stanwyck and Asther Featured,” *Los Angeles Times* (16 January 1933).

⁸⁵ Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, p.140.

⁸⁶ “The Bitter Tea Stays at Rialto for Second Week,” *The Atlanta Constitution* (15 January 1933). Interestingly, in this case the Southern newspaper seems to accept miscegenation in both *Broken Blossoms* and *Bitter Tea*. There was always more sympathy towards implied sex between white Americans and Chinese than between Blacks and whites.

⁸⁷ Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, p. 140.

man could be as charismatic as the romanticised Yen he had in mind.⁸⁸ Once more, in representing Chinese people to American audiences, a Hollywood director endeavoured to invent a fanaticised China to meet western imaginations of the Far East rather than making any effort to present (even if he claimed this) an authentic China.

To make Yen look “real,” Capra closely studied what he thought of as the different facial features between the two races, especially the eye shapes of the Chinese, in order to remould more accurately his white actor’s eyes with prosthetic makeup. The crew spent a lot of money in reconstructing China in general and Chinese people in particular. In remoulding Asther’s eyes, for example, they clipped his eyelashes to create a long and thin eye shape – something that caused the actor severe “klieg eyes” (eye burn caused by exposure to bright studio lighting without protection from eyelashes). Asther had to be locked in a dark dressing room in between shots and wear red goggles during rehearsals in order to protect his eyes from further injury.⁸⁹ These efforts paid off in the end as many critics marvelled at Asther’s characterisation of a Chinese general in the film. The *Daily Boston Globe* praised Asther for “[standing] out as an excellent actor, whose make-up is as carefully studied as is his characterization, and who completely understands the half-primitive, half-sophisticated and poetical Gen Yen, Chinese Bandit.”⁹⁰ Critic D. K. expressed similar view in *The (Baltimore) Sun*:

Nils Asther...suddenly springs into the front rank with a characterization of Yen which can only called superb. Handsomer than any Chinese general has a right to be, Mr. Asther appears to equal advantage in Westernized uniform or mandarin robe. But his laurels do not depend on his appearance. He has been able to assume an Oriental

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 141.

⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 141-42.

⁹⁰ “New Films: Keith Theatre ‘Bitter Tea of General Yen’ Harry Delmar’s ‘Revels’”, *Daily Boston Globe* (9 January 1933).

personality. He is suave, secretive, subtle, cruel, forceful, proud. Many sudden flashes reveal glimpses of a profoundly mystical and complex nature, but at the end one feels that even so there are still unsounded depths in this fascinating China gentleman bandit, who is able to say ‘To conquer a province or a woman—what’s the difference?’⁹¹

Asther’s characterisation of Yen epitomised many Americans’ impressions of China at the time. Some intriguing adjectives were used to describe him in the original reviews, such as: half-primitive, half-sophisticated, secretive, suave, subtle, cruel, mystical, complex, forceful, proud. These seemingly contradictory descriptions of Yen, being derived (as Harold Isaacs has pointed out) from the two culturally-inherited images of China in western culture – Marco Polo and Genghis Khan – became intricately embodied in one man. Through the character Yen, the audience is offered an image of both a ruthless, primitive and unconvertable Chinese “heathen” and a philosophical, poetic and in many ways admirable Chinese romancer. The presentation of China as background is consistent with the development of the main character, Yen, as both “half-primitive” and “half-sophisticated” – the country is shown as both chaotic and desperate (represented by the sequence of Shanghai under attack), as well as opulent and peaceful (for example, the depiction of Yen’s summer palace).

In *Bitter Tea*, Capra made huge efforts to show the Depression-torn audience a luxurious and opulent Far Eastern environment. The summer palace of Yen is very reminiscent of the extravagant Chinese temple in D. W. Griffith’s film *Broken Blossoms* and the lavish Chinese underground palace in *The Mask of Fu Manchu*. Yen’s palace is not only spacious but luxuriously furnished with exquisite oriental decorations. All of these are eye-

⁹¹ D. K., “Screen: The Bitter Tea of Gen. Yen, Film of American Girl in China, at the New Theater,” *The Baltimore Sun* (7 January 1933).

opening enough to impress depression-weary American audiences. The costumes of both protagonists are also delicate and serve as important motifs in conveying deeper meanings of the characters' identities and psychological activities in the film. For example, Megan is introduced wearing a western-styled dress (her wedding dress) – it later becomes an important motif – a visual representation of her identity as a western woman in a Chinese setting. After she is taken to Yen's palace, she changes to wearing a Chinese gown. From this point, in the rest of the film, she changes her clothes back and forth between Western and Eastern styles, suggesting changing stances in terms of her own East-West struggle. In one sequence, Megan first dolls herself up with a Chinese dress and exotic jewellery for a dinner invitation by Yen. But before she leaves her room, she suddenly decides to remove all her make-up and puts on the tattered wedding dress to regain her power as a western woman. During the dinner, she fiercely quarrels with the general in defence of his faithless concubine Mah-Li. The image of Megan in her own (western) dress suggests her empowerment and independence in contrast to her Chinese counterpart Mah-Li, who is obedient on the outside and treacherous within.



(Figure 3.15: Megan arguing with Yen in her wedding dress contrasting with Yen in a Manchurian outfit)

According to Edward Said, orientalism itself is naturally a patriarchal discourse. It

constructs the East as feminine, “its riches as fertile, its main symbols the sensual woman, the harem and despotic – but curiously attractive – ruler.”⁹² Based on Said’s theory, Rawitsch argues that even western women, in this discourse, are given a relatively masculine role in their relationships with their female Eastern counterparts or even the feminised Eastern males.⁹³ In *Bitter Tea*, Megan sympathises with Mah-Li and instantly assumes the dominant role in their relationship and becomes her protector. Although General Yen is not feminised in the narrative, when he explains to Megan how he maintains a prestigious family’s loyalty by holding their only son – Captain Li (Richard Loo) – hostage, Megan replies “that’s why China is two thousand years behind the time.” Western morality and civilisation are continuously shown as superior to the Eastern, in a way that can even be read as a justification for the West’s intervention and imperialism in the Far East. So much so, indeed, as Gina Marchetti has pointed out, that this film “establishes a Western moral tone and perspective on the outset, which is only questioned much later.”⁹⁴

Such a condescending tone has been established from the beginning of the film—in the opening sequence, for example, Bishop Harkness (Emmett Corrigan), who is portrayed as having been in China for fifty years, pessimistically calls his fellow-missionaries “a lot of persistent ants trying to move a great mountain.” He tells with great melancholy a story of a group of Mongolian tribesmen who had once seemed to be moved by the story he told of Christ’s crucifixion. However, they went on to crucify the next caravan of merchants who crossed the Gobi Desert. Harkness expresses great agony as he feels hopeless about China and its people. In this sequence, the stereotypical association of China, Mongolian tribesmen (the descendants of Genghis Khan), and cruelty is foregrounded to emphasise the barbarism

⁹² Rawitsch, *Frank Capra’s Eastern Horizon*, p. 78.; Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 1-15.

⁹³ Rawitsch, *Frank Capra’s Eastern Horizon*, p. 79.

⁹⁴ Marchetti, *Romance and the “Yellow Peril,”* p. 51.

and backwardness of Chinese people.

Based on the correspondence between the office of Will Hays (the president of the MPPDA) and the studio, although several issues were raised about the representation of Christian missionaries in *Bitter Tea* regarding the Production Code's stipulations around religion, little attention was paid to the unfair treatments of the Chinese as unsavable barbarians. In an inter-office memo from the Hays Office, Geoffrey Shurlock assured Dr J. Wingate, head of the Studio Relations Committee (SRC), that although the film does "portray the gigantic and, at times, hopeless task that the missionaries have in trying to convert a country like China; and a good many of the lines from the missionaries themselves, as well as from the Chinese General and his American associate, emphasize the apparent hopelessness of the undertaking," there was nothing problematic but only commendatory about the missionaries' selfless and persistent efforts in the film.⁹⁵

There were, in fact, some questions raised about the derogatory remarks about the Chinese in *Bitter Tea*. In a letter to Columbia, for example, Jason Joy had advised the studio to refer to the Chinese characters as "Chinese" rather than using the term "Chinaman", as Joy believed that "the Chinese themselves prefer it so."⁹⁶ Frederick L. Herron, head of the foreign department of the MPPDA, also wrote to Hays to report a received telegram from the Chinese Chargé D'Affaires in Washington protesting against offensive scenes and remarks about the Chinese, including a gruesome scene of General Yen's army shooting war prisoners, and lines like "human life is the cheapest thing in China," "Yellow Swine," and the statement that the Chinese are immoral and treacherous.⁹⁷ Columbia, however, insisted in reply that the film was a "convincing refutation of the foreign opinion of Chinese characters," and these

⁹⁵ Memo to Dr. Wingate from Geoffrey Shurlock, 19 January 1933, *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* file, PCA file.

⁹⁶ Jason S. Joy to Harry Cohn, 11 July 1932, *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, PCA file.

⁹⁷ Frederick L. Herron to Will Hays, 17 January 1933, *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, PCA file.

“seemingly derogatory remarks” needed to be preserved to serve this purpose.⁹⁸

Columbia claimed the film to be “a eulogy of the Chinese philosophy, fair dealing, morality and graciousness. The audience, following the conduct of the Chinese General, who is the hero of the story, gradually becomes ashamed of the Americans who are placed in contrast with him.”⁹⁹ For this reason, the majority of the problematic remarks and sequences objected to by the Chinese legation and advised upon by Joy were preserved in the final film. “[The Chinese] are all tricky, treacherous and immoral,” says Mrs. Reed (Helen Jerome Eddy) at the beginning of the film, “I can’t tell one from the other, they are all Chinaman to me.” The scene about war prisoners being ruthlessly shot down against a wall in Yen’s palace is not only preserved, but also quite prolonged, being shown to spectators three times from different characters’ perspectives. Such unfortunate treatments of the Chinese characters and blunt disregard for Chinese officials’ objections (nothing had been even mildly changed to placate the Chinese legation) indicated the insignificance of Chinese people’s feelings to Hollywood during the Pre-Code era.

In general terms, *Bitter Tea* follows the stereotypical construction of Orientalism – it shows the East as a less advantaged subordinate which needs Western dominance. However, as a Pre-Code picture and with the director’s endeavour to make something edgy to win Academy awards, the film also includes some bold depictions of Yen and Megan’s relationship, revolving around the theme of miscegenation, which were unconventional in reversing traditional East-West power dynamics. As mentioned above, General Yen is a complicated character who is cruel and mystical but also, in many ways, very westernised. He speaks fluent English, lives a western lifestyle (wears western uniform, drinks brandy, etc.), and, more importantly, he hires an American man called Jones as his financial advisor.

⁹⁸ J. V. Wilson to Will Hays, 21 January 1933, *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, PCA file.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

Yen is very much a “Robber Baron” who exploits his territories to get rich while employing western economic tactics to expand his wealth and military power. He is shown as a sophisticated man successfully manipulating both eastern and western rules and knowledge to maximise his gains.

In contrast, the major American characters – Megan, Jones, and Strife – are all overpowered by Yen in their respective relationships with him. Strife pleads with Yen to get a travel pass and later loses his fiancée because of the Chinese general. Jones is employed by Yen as financial adviser and admires the powerful warlord as a man. The final scene in which Jones suggests to Megan that there is reincarnation and a next life, when they will eventually reunite with Yen, seemingly suggests the American pair’s acceptance of Chinese cultural and religious values. More importantly, although Megan is first abducted by Yen against her will, she gradually falls for him—in the end, Megan kneels down before and leans against Yen, and she “[offers] to become his handmaiden, voluntarily, respectfully, and unconditionally.”¹⁰⁰ These actions subordinate Megan (a white woman and missionary) to the Chinese warlord, which accomplishes Yen’s earlier aspiration to “conquer a woman” and “convert a missionary.” The film, therefore, offers a rather cynical view of racism and religion while showing a masculine, sophisticated, and economically-empowered East in a dominant role and a beautiful, naïve, and fragile West eventually in subservience.

¹⁰⁰ D. K., “Screen: The Bitter Tea of General Yen.”



(Figure 3.16: The scene with Megan expressing her love, both characters in Chinese costumes)

Capra insisted that his film was thirty years ahead of its time. This is true at one level as it attempts to be sympathetic in its coverage of an interracial relationship in an era when miscegenation was banned in American cinema and illegal in many states. Some liberal reviewers seemed unbothered by the film's view of miscegenation. For example, one critic believed that "the love of a Chinese General for a white woman is handled delicately and in such manner as not to offend the most rabid proponent of anti-Oriental propaganda."¹⁰¹ Another claimed that Asther's characterisation is so charming that "there is no surprise in the audience when they discover that the girl, though she is white and he is Chinese, has fallen in love with her captor."¹⁰²

More reviewers of the early 1930s, however, were obviously not ready for such liberal ideas. The cinema trade journal *Variety* predicted that "Seeing a Chinaman attempting to

¹⁰¹ "New Films," *Daily Boston Globe* (9 January 1933).

¹⁰² "The Bitter Tea Stays at Rialto for Second Week," *The Atlanta Constitution*.

romance with a pretty and supposedly decent young American white woman is bound to evoke adverse reaction.”¹⁰³ Another prestigious trade magazine, *Harrison's Reports*, also claimed that “The one thing that will kill this picture is the fact that a white woman is shown falling in love with a Chinese brigand general. Right or wrong, the idea of seeing a love affair between people of two dissimilar races, particularly when the woman is white, is extremely distasteful to American audiences.”¹⁰⁴ It was controversial enough for American audiences to see a Chinese man pursuing a New England girl; it was, perhaps, even more problematic for them to watch her desiring her Chinese captor in a carnal way. Traditional captivity narratives in western culture aimed either to caution independent-minded women to stay away from unauthorised exogamous relationships, or to legitimate racism and even massacres that occurred in revenge for stealing white women away.¹⁰⁵ As a captivity narrative, *Bitter Tea* atypically presented the alien captor as the sexualised object from the white female captive's gaze – a bold flirtation with female sexual autonomy and a challenge to both conventional racial prejudice and white patriarchy.

General Yen is, perhaps, the earliest representation of a Chinese man who is portrayed as sexually desirable in his relationship with a white woman (although Sessue Hayakawa, a Japanese actor, was the first famously remembered Asian man to be portrayed as sexually attractive in Hollywood history in the film *The Cheat* [1915]). The most controversial sequence in *Bitter Tea* is Megan's erotic dream about the Chinese general. In her dream, Yen appears initially as a monstrous man in a Chinese gown with pointed ears and fingernails trying to force himself on her. In the nick of time, however, a masked man in a western outfit shows up and rescues her from the monstrous Yen. Megan embraces the hero, caresses his

¹⁰³ Shan, “Bitter Tea of General Yen,” *Variety* (17 January 1933).

¹⁰⁴ “‘The Bitter Tea of General Yen’ with Barbara Stanwyck and Nils Asther,” *Harrison's Report* (7 January 1933).

¹⁰⁵ Marchetti, *Romance and the “Yellow Peril,”* pp. 47-49.

face, and removes the mask which reveals the hero to be Yen himself. This time, she seems not troubled by who he is now that he is westernised. They kiss pleasantly and the shot dissolves as he lowers her onto the bed. The following scene is of Megan waking up with a shocked expression on her face. These sequences make it clear to viewers that she *is* attracted to General Yen sexually as a woman, but what she finds problematic as a white Protestant missionary is his alien identity as a Chinese.

Although Yen is shown as a relatively westernised Chinese man in many ways, racial differences between him and Megan are visually emphasised throughout the film. For example, he is always seen in Chinese outfits when he is with Megan while she, as already noted, wears her tattered western dress (Yen even wears at times a Manchurian government officer's cap and robe from the time of Qing Dynasty, which is slightly odd because he is a Chinese warlord during the Chinese Civil War era – a role that only began to exist after the end of the Qing dynasty). The only time Yen shows up in a western-style military uniform to meet Megan is followed by her erotic dream about him. As Megan's outfits are used to stress her western identity, the excessively exotic attires of Yen are also used to accentuate the differences and incompatibility between the two. Although in the last scenes, Megan voluntarily changes into a Chinese gown and confesses her love to the general, the convenient death of the Chinese warlord prevents any actual miscegenation from taking place. In the original novel, as Rawitsch points out, the "bitter tea" is purely metaphoric and there is not a definite indication that the general dies in the end.¹⁰⁶ The film version, however, changed the "bitter tea" into actual poison to assure the audience that the Chinese warlord dies before his relationship with Megan could develop further. The paradox of the film is that it indeed challenges certain racial and sexual stereotypes to a considerable extent, yet, even as a Pre-Code film driven by the director's strong ambition to make it "arty," it still excluded the

¹⁰⁶ Rawitsch, *Frank Capra's Eastern Horizons*, p.88.

possibility of racial integration, and ultimately emphasised the dichotomy between East and West.

Barbara Stanwyck received much criticism for her performance as Megan: for example “the complexities of the role engulf her”; she does not fit “a New England missionary type”; “her diction is somewhat too strident”, etc.¹⁰⁷ Besides the objective reason that her acting might not have been at its best in *Bitter Tea*, contemporary American racism – audience’s lack of acceptance of Megan’s love interest in her Chinese captor – and her female autonomy and sexuality shown in the film were all contributory factors that evoked adverse reactions in audiences. For instance, reviewer Shan commented on the erotic dream sequence that “for the first half where she repulses the Chinaman [it] gathers some audience sympathy. Subsequently, where the photography attempts to simulate that the girl, in her dreams, loves the Chinese, the role fails her.”¹⁰⁸ The final production of *Bitter Tea* was prestigious enough to open at the Radio City Music Hall in New York. However, it was not deemed good enough to be nominated for an Academy Award as Capra had hoped, even expected. “Damn those Academy voters!”, Capra angrily declared, “couldn’t they recognize a work of art when they saw one? Nevertheless, *Bitter Tea* will remain forever as one of *my* pet pictures”.¹⁰⁹ More seriously for the Columbia studio, the film – which had cost a million dollars to produce – proved unprofitable because, among other reasons, the UK and British Commonwealth countries banned it because of its presentation of miscegenation.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Scheuer, “East and West Meet Again”; Shan, “Bitter Tea of General Yen”; Mordaunt Hall, “The Screen: Radio City Music Hall Shows a Melodrama of China as Its First Pictorial Attraction,” *New York Times Film Reviews* (12 January 1933).

¹⁰⁸ Shan, “Bitter Tea of General Yen.”

¹⁰⁹ Capra, *The Name Above the Title*, p. 142.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.; Dan Callahan, *Barbara Stanwyck: The Miracle Woman* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p. 28.

Chapter Four: The Production Code Administration and the Filmic Representations of the Chinese

The American film industry itself had gone through a series of major changes before the beginning of the Great Depression. During the 1920s, Hollywood had been increasingly questioned for its morality despite its seemingly unstoppable business development. After a series of off-screen scandals involving film industry personnel and what seemed to some Americans increasingly shocking content in films themselves, more and more cities and states began to authorise censors to “guard” their theatres in order to avoid inappropriate or immoral movie content. Before 1920, some cities (led by Chicago in 1907) had established local censorship boards and four states had done the same: Pennsylvania (1911), Ohio (1914), Kansas (1915) and Maryland (1916). In the early 1920s, state censorship was adopted in New York (1921) and Virginia (1922) – seven censorship boards in total were formed across the US by this time.¹

Seeing the increasing number of local censorship jurisdictions being created in the early 1920s, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), a trade association formed within the industry, was founded in 1922, and studio executives recruited Will H. Hays, a Presbyterian elder, former chairman of the Republican National Committee (1918-21), and Postmaster General (1921-22), to head the organisation for the purpose of “cleaning up” the motion picture industry from within.² In 1927, the MPPDA issued a list of moral guidelines – the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” – for film producers to follow as a response to the increasing pressure for censoring Hollywood. The list was later revised into more

¹ Laura Wittern-Keller, “The Origins of Governmental Film Censorship, 1907-1923,” *Freedom of the Screen: Legal Challenges to State Censorship, 1915-1981* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008).

² Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, p. 6.

detailed guidance in 1930 that would become known as the Motion Picture Production Code, largely written by Jesuit priest Father Daniel Lord and Roman Catholic layman Martin Quigley. This – though subsequently revised – would remain in existence until the 1960s.³

The new Production Code was not treated very seriously by many film-makers in the first years after its introduction. During what would later come to be referred to as the Pre-Code era (1930-1934), the financial pressures on the movie industry brought by the Great Depression would help ensure that morally questionable content in Hollywood films (as a means of continuing to attract movie-goers) would flourish rather than decline. Religious groups, especially the American Roman Catholic Church, reacted fiercely to what the motion picture industry as a whole was doing – an organisation called the Legion of Decency was founded by Catholics in 1933 to “clean up ‘the pest hole that infects the entire country with its obscene and lascivious moving pictures.’”⁴

The world of academe seemed to be moving in a similar direction – in 1933, the Motion Picture Research Council released the first results of a five-year investigation financed by the Payne Fund into the influence of motion pictures on youth, which concluded that movies encouraged juvenile delinquency on the part of young boys and girls.⁵ Also, in December 1933, the National Recovery Administration (NRA), a Federal body set up as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, announced the introduction of a Code Authority for the film industry “to regulate not only business operations,” but everything from wages to ticket prices and film contents.⁶ The NRA largely colluded with the big studios as it did with other big businesses.⁷ From the beginning of 1934, therefore, the American film

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 320.

⁵ Ibid., p. 322. The investigation was broadly summarised in a book called *Our Movie-Made Children* (1933) by Henry James Forman.

⁶ Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, p. 323.

⁷ Donald R. Brand, *Corporatism and the Rule of Law: A Study of the National Recovery Administration* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988).

industry was facing increasing criticism, scrutiny and regulation from churches, academics and governmental agencies. The need for an effective self-regulatory agency within the industry to resist all the pressures for intervention from outside forces had never been so urgent.⁸ In mid-1934, the Production Code Administration was created by the MPPDA, with the tough Irish Catholic layman Joseph I. Breen appointed as the head of the new agency. The PCA was not only strongly backed by the MPPDA but also by the financial backers of the movie industry in New York. From 1934 till the end of the PCA (in the late 1960s), Hollywood films were required to be granted an approval from the PCA before being allowed to be screened in theatres belonging to members of the MPPDA. During the twenty years Breen served in office, he played a significant role in defining what was considered appropriate for American audiences to watch in a film – “I am the Code” as Breen stated himself, meaning he was the one who had the authority to enforce and embody it within the American motion picture industry.⁹

The PCA and the Chinese Nationalist Government

Once the Production Code began to be enforced by the PCA, a broad spectrum of representations considered morally questionable were forbidden from appearing in films. These included, for example, expressing sympathy with crimes and criminals, any presentations that might harm the sanctity of the institution of marriage, sex perversions (Code-speak for homosexuality), miscegenation (defined as “sex relationship between the white and black races”), profanity, and disrespect towards any religious faith.¹⁰ Under the

⁸ The strategy on the part of the film industry of pre-empting governmental censorship by supporting an industry-run watchdog can be traced back to the organisation of the New York Board of Censorship (subsequently re-named the National Board of Censorship and later the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures) in 1909. See <http://archives.nypl.org/mss/2100>

⁹ Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, p. 327.

¹⁰ “Particular Applications of the Code and the Reasons Therefore [Addenda To 1930 Code],” *Pre-Code Hollywood*, Appendix 2, p. 363. Some of these provisions, including

provision *National Feelings*, the Code explicitly stipulated that “The history, institutions, prominent people and citizenry of other nations shall be represented fairly.”¹¹ This clause gave the Chinese Nationalist government hope that it might change the existing images of China and Chinese people in American films.

The Chinese government, in fact, had begun to put pressure on Hollywood even before the foundation of the PCA. In 1931, General Chiang Kai-shek, the head of the Nationalist government, created the National Board of Film Censors (NBFC) to deal with film matters both domestically and internationally.¹² The NBFC was later reorganised into a new agency called the Central Motion Picture Censorship Committee (CMPCC) in 1934, which lasted for another four years until its dissolution in 1938, by which time the Nationalist government had become overwhelmed by the war with Japan.¹³ During the years of the existence of these two Chinese censorship agencies, according to Hye Seung Chung, “the Chinese government saw cinema as a medium of national ‘uplift’ that served public educational purposes.”¹⁴ Vice-consul Yi-Seng Kiang was consequently sent to Los Angeles at the beginning of the 1930s by the Nationalist government to influence the representations of China and its people in Hollywood pictures.¹⁵ The fact that the Chinese government banned all Paramount productions for the studio’s offensive portrayals of the Chinese in *Shanghai Express* in 1932 demonstrated China’s rising nationalism in the early 1930s and Chinese elites’ awareness of the global influence of Hollywood productions.¹⁶

miscegenation, had supposedly already been banned under the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” adopted by the MPPDA in 1927.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 364.

¹² Hye Seung Chung, “Hollywood Diplomacy and *The Purple Heart* (1944): Preserving Wartime Alliances through Film Regulation,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* vol. 38, no. 3 (18 September 2017), p. 497.

¹³ Hye Seung Chung, *Hollywood Diplomacy: Film Regulation, Foreign Relations, and East Asian Representations* (Rutgers University Press, 2020), p. 655 (Kindle version).

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 644 (Kindle version).

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 625 (Kindle version).

¹⁶ Chung, “Hollywood Diplomacy and *The Purple Heart* (1944),” p. 497.

The Chinese Nationalist government regarded the introduction of the Code and later the enforcement of it by the PCA as providing invaluable opportunities to reconstruct the generally unfavourable representation of China in American films. Vice-Consul Kiang and his successor T. K. Chang liaised with Hollywood studios both during and after the founding of the PCA. During Consul Chang's term of office, he corresponded vigorously with studios and subsequently with Joseph I. Breen about films with Chinese settings or Chinese characters. Chang usually approached studios and the PCA when he learned that films about China were about to be made, and he would provide detailed suggestions for the scripts and follow up his ideas with the producers both during and after the production of the films. Chang later explained that the general principles of Chinese Nationalist censorship for foreign motion pictures were:

1. If they are derogatory to the dignity of the Chinese race; 2. If they are contrary to the Three People's Principles (nationalism, democracy, and people's welfare); 3. If they tend to injure good morals or disturb the public order; 4. If they tend to foster superstition and heresy.¹⁷

As discussed in the previous chapter, a Chinese warlord film cycle emerged in Hollywood during the early 1930s. The Chinese Nationalists, for obvious reasons, did not want their country to be perceived by western countries as a warring and feudal state with both an incompetent government and many regional warlords ("Robber Barons"). Consequently, objections against such productions were often raised by Chinese officials. Breen, in many cases, advised studios to avoid friction with the Chinese (sometimes even before they complained) by omitting or changing scenes that might be offensive to Chinese

¹⁷ John Eugene Harley, *World-wide Influences of the Cinema: a study of official censorship and the international cultural aspects of motion pictures* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 1940), p. 110.

people. For example, after reviewing the first draft script of *Roaming Lady* (1936), an American adventure film set in China and involving Chinese bandits, Breen wrote to Harry Cohn, the production director of Columbia Pictures, to suggest recognising political sensitivities in China:

Care will be needed not to exaggerate the characterization of the Chinese in this story so as to make them appear either offensive or ridiculous. With regard to the characterization of General Fang, we suggest that he be characterized, definitely as a bandit General, and that you do whatever you can to build up the importance of the legitimate General, Chin See. In this connection, it will be highly advisable *not* to refer to Fang as a War Lord, as this title is usually applied to the actual ruler of the various Chinese Provinces nowadays. Also, we recommend that care be taken in the casting and portrayal of the Chinese officers and soldiers in this picture, to the end that, even though they are characterized as bandits, their appearance, and actions on the screen will not offend the sensibilities of the Chinese.¹⁸

Breen also suggested the producer avoid presenting all the Chinese characters in the film as villains and deleting offensive references to them.¹⁹

Many similar suggestions about treating Chinese people more sympathetically were given by the PCA to studios and film producers in this era. However, evidence also indicates that Breen, personally, was uncomfortable with the idea that the American film industry should consistently accommodate objections from foreign governments. In a letter he wrote to Colonel Frederick L. (“Ted”) Herron, manager of the foreign department of the MPPDA, Breen complained about the difficulties he had encountered with the Chinese consul over a 1937 film called *Black Torrent (Outlaws of the Orient)* produced by Larry Darmour. Breen

¹⁸ Albert S. Rogell, *Roaming Lady* (Columbia Pictures, 1936); Joseph I. Breen to Harry Cohn, 2 October 1935, *Roaming Lady* file, PCA file, digital collection.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

complained that, after all the compromises and sacrifices Darmour had made to appease Chang, the Chinese consul still found it offensive to his people after viewing the final production. Breen expressed great frustration that:

My reaction to my efforts, during the past month, to do business with the Consul is that the task is utterly impossible. If we are to endeavor to comply with what Mr. Chang wants us to do, we will not be able, at any time, to use a Chinese in any characterization ... I do not think we ought to waste any time in an attempt to satisfy these various local consuls. In my experience with them, they are very unreasonable ...²⁰

Breen suggested that, in future, the PCA would let studios themselves decide whether to listen to the consul or not. And in his own judgment, with this level of arbitrariness from the Chinese consul, the studios would probably “throw up their hands and pay no attention ... to [Chang] or his protests.”²¹ In the case of a Warner Bros. film *West of Shanghai* (originally titled *Cornered* and then *War Lord*, 1937), according to Ruth Vasey, Consul Chang protested against the uniforms that the bandits characters wear in the film as they were too similar to those of the National Army of China.²² Since there was no economic way to change what the bandits wear in every sequence in which they appear (except by reshooting a large portion of the film), the company decided to continue with what they had, only with an insertion of a preface explaining the bandits had nothing to do with the legitimate Chinese army. “Since we are going to be in bad anyway,” Sam Morris (manager of the foreign department) and Walter MacEwen (Head of Production) wrote to Jack Warner, “we might as well change the title to

²⁰ Joseph I. Breen to Frederick L. Herron, 4 June 1937, *West of Shanghai* file, PCA files.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918-1939* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p. 175.

West of Shanghai as this title will undoubtedly mean extra dollars in countries where the picture can be released.”²³

In a letter to Colonel Herron about *West of Shanghai*, Breen also expressed his sympathies with the studio and accused not only the Chinese but *all* foreign consuls of being unreasonable in their demands. He even implied that the pressure from foreign consuls was limiting the creativity of the American film industry. After venting all his grievances, however, Breen very rationally conceded that:

As I view it—we can be “free, sovereign, and independent” and tell everybody to go to hell, and make all the pictures we want, with Chinese, German, French (or anybody else) characterized in every way possible. On the other hand, if we want to continue to maintain our very lucrative foreign fields, we shall have to be, possibly, less “free, and sovereign—and less independent.”²⁴

The foreign problem Breen faced was, in fact, Hollywood fantasy versus world commercial reality. On the one hand, movie-goers seemed attracted by the exotic fantasies about “other” nations and people; on the other hand, the foreign countries being presented and fantasised about were also important markets for Hollywood’s films. The international market generated approximately 35% of Hollywood’s total revenue in the 1930s, and Breen’s complaining letter indicated his full recognition of the financial contribution of the foreign market.²⁵ Therefore, the PCA, despite all the frustration and annoyance caused by various foreign consuls, still made half-hearted efforts to placate them. Any appeasement Hollywood made to foreign consuls, however, did not necessarily mean they would improve the images of foreign nations in the ways the consuls themselves demanded. In many cases, in fact,

²³ Ibid., p. 177.

²⁴ Joseph I. Breen to Frederick L. Herron, 11 June 1937, *West of Shanghai* file, PCA files.

²⁵ Chung, “Hollywood Diplomacy and *The Purple Heart* (1944),” p. 497.

studios would perfunctorily insert explanatory prefaces which, according to Vasey, “spoke more to institutions than to audiences, particularly to censors, to reformers ...”²⁶ In some instances, Vasey concludes, studios even gave up on co-operation with foreign consuls at the point where “diplomacy ceased to make economic sense.”²⁷ For many low-budgeted B-class productions, which the studios did not plan for massive worldwide releases (e.g. *Outlaws of the Orient* and *West of Shanghai*), they were more likely to “slip through the MPPDA’s net,” and film companies seemed to have had more discretion in presenting foreign nationals as they wanted in these productions.²⁸

For the pictures that film companies planned would largely rely on foreign markets, however, the situation was slightly different. Although the Chinese film market did not contribute much revenue to Hollywood during the 1930s (about one thirtieth of the revenue the British market generated), the Chinese government still managed to bring financial pressure on Hollywood in its foreign markets using China’s diplomatic influence.²⁹ One example of this was the incident relating to Harold Lloyd’s film *The Cat’s Paw* (1934), the second film of his that had aggravated the Chinese.³⁰ In 1930, Lloyd’s *Welcome Danger* (1929) premièred in two Shanghai theatres in the International Settlement.³¹ The film tells the story of young man Harold Bledsoe (Harold Lloyd) who arrives in San Francisco to investigate a crime in Chinatown. The Chinese characters in this film are all portrayed in an unsympathetic light (e.g. as criminals and opium abusers). Angry Chinese audiences wrote to newspapers on the release day furiously to complain about the derogatory image of the

²⁶ Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood*, p. 178.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. 179.

²⁹ Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood*, p. 155.

³⁰ Sam Taylor, *The Cat’s Paw* (The Harold Lloyd Corporation, 1934).

³¹ Clyde Bruckman, *Welcome Danger* (The Harold Lloyd Corporation, 1929).

Chinese in the film.³² Hong Shen, a Harvard-educated playwright and professor at Fudan University, even wrote to the Shanghai branch of the Nationalist Party to condemn the film, referring to African Americans protesting against *The Birth of a Nation* as an example for the Chinese.³³ *Welcome Danger* and its production company, the Harold Lloyd Corporation, was subsequently banned by the Chinese Nationalist government until Lloyd officially apologised to China and the Chinese people, which made it possible for his other productions to be released in China in the future.³⁴ In 1934, *The Cat's Paw* got the company in trouble again with the Chinese government, only this time it involved more complicated diplomatic pressures on the production and distribution companies.

The Cat's Paw tells the story of a missionary's child, Ezekiel Cobb (Harold Lloyd), who grows up in Chengdu (the capital city of Sichuan province of China) and is sent back to the United States to seek a wife before he can return China to carry on his father's Christian mission. During his stay in his home country, however, Ezekiel is accidentally involved in a political conspiracy, in which he is able to use his "Chinese" knowledge and methods to defeat the villains. As in many other American films, Chinese people shown in *The Cat's Paw* speak Cantonese – in reality, as residents of Sichuan, they would have spoken the local dialect. The film-makers naively presented Cantonese (the dialect of Canton, the region from which the majority of the Chinese immigrants to the United States had earlier come) as the only language used by Chinese people. Many make-believe "Chinese" philosophies and phrases were referred to or used at various points in the film. All of them without exception were creations of American film-makers—for example, Ezekiel's constant references to

³² Mei Jiang, "The *Welcome Danger* Scandal: an American film to be Released and Banned in China," *China Archives News* (21 November 2018). Retrieved from: http://www.zgdazxw.com.cn/culture/2018-11/21/content_255730.htm

³³ Chung, *Hollywood Diplomacy*, pp. 700-10 (Kindle version).

³⁴ For more about this controversy, see Hye Seung Chung's *Hollywood Diplomacy*, p. 696 (Kindle version).

fictional Chinese philosopher Ling Po and his work – *A Treatise on the Philosophy and Psychology of Ling Po* (靈普哲學心理論述) – were pure fabrications. There is one close-up shot of the book in the film which, ironically, is actually a shot of the *Analects of Confucius* being held up-side-down.



(Figure 4.1: The so-called *A Treatise on the Philosophy and Psychology of Ling Po* is shown as the *Analects of Confucius* being held up-side-down.)

These misrepresentations of Chinese culture reflected the screenwriters' and producers' deplorable lack of knowledge of China in general. After the release of the film, the Chinese government banned it for its untruthful presentation of the country and its culture, and the film subsequently became the subject of a strong protest by the China Embassy in Italy when it premiered in Rome. During the 1930s, according to Hye Seung Chung, China had allied with other governments (Italy and Germany) reciprocally to bar Hollywood films that were offensive to each other's nationalities/ethnicities.³⁵ China had consequently banned two 1930

³⁵ Chung, *Hollywood Diplomacy*, p. 765 (Kindle version).

films, *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Hell's Angels*, for their “anti-German” context and one 1936 film called *Give Us This Night* for its offensive presentations of Italians.³⁶ (The existence of international collaborations of this kind to ban Hollywood films was given official recognition in a 1937 press release from the U.S. Department of Commerce, which reported that China and Italy had achieved a verbal agreement on reciprocal censorship of motion pictures. Under the agreement, “the two Governments, Italian and Chinese, will take measures for prohibiting the projection of any film offensive to one of the two countries.”³⁷) In 1934, therefore, *The Cat's Paw* was immediately banned by the Italian government on its opening day in Rome because of a protest by the Chinese embassy.³⁸

The producers of *The Cat's Paw*, however, were befuddled by Chinese disapproval of the film. In a letter from the Harold Lloyd Corporation (the production company) to Frank Harris, an officer of Fox Film Corporation (the distributor), General Manager W. R. Fraser stated:

Without knowing for just what reason the picture has been disapproved and in the face that we all felt it was a great story from the Chinese angle ... as far as we can see, there is absolutely nothing in the American version beyond the word “Chink” to which they should possibly take exception.³⁹

Harris shared Fraser's complete lack of understanding of the Chinese and concluded that “truly, ‘the ways of the Chinese are a mystery.’”⁴⁰ By this point, Hollywood had already

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 756-57 (Kindle version); Lewis Milestone, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Universal Studios, 1930); Howard Hughes, *Hell's Angels* (The Caddo Company, 1930).

³⁷ “World Wide Motion Picture Developments” (15 March 1937), publications of the Department of Commerce in RG 287, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

³⁸ Sam Taylor, *The Cat's Paw* (The Harold Lloyd Corporation, 1934).

³⁹ W.R. Fraser to Frank Harris, 5 December 1934, *The Cat's Paw* file, Harold Lloyd Papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, California.

⁴⁰ Ibid.; Frank Harris to W. R. Fraser, 6 December 1934, *The Cat's Paw* file, Harold Lloyd Papers.

developed certain fixed ideas about China and Chinese people, which would supposedly lead films about them to be considered “authentic” by the general public. In many film producers’ own minds, some stereotypical representations of the Chinese appeared sympathetic and positive. And if these representations were good enough for American audiences, the producers believed they should be acceptable to the Chinese themselves. In fact, many studios had complained about Chinese people’s hypersensitivity about their representation in American films. The bewilderment of executives at the Harold Lloyd and Fox Film Corporations at Chinese people’s aversion to the film *The Cat’s Paw* reflected Hollywood’s condescendence toward, as well as ignorance about, real Chinese people.

After the incident in Rome, Fox Film began to negotiate with the Chinese embassy for a solution acceptable to both. Although, obviously, there were cultural misunderstandings between the two, diplomatic measures were working their way to pressuring Hollywood to listen to the Chinese, at least at a superficial level. In Harris’s reply to Fraser, he remarked that “through the exchange of a number of cables, we now learn that with slight changes the *The Cat’s Paw* has become acceptable to the Chinese Embassy in Rome and will reopen its engagement. From this distance it is, of course, impossible to say what effect this series of events may have on our engagement in Rome.”⁴¹ According to the PCA documents, Fox Film was eager to circulate *The Cat’s Paw* in China in spite of its government’s objection, and they even came up with a plan to slip the film into southern China through Hong Kong, where the film market was controlled by British censors who were considered “much more liberal than is the Chiang Kai Chek [sic] outfit in and around Nanking.”⁴² Nevertheless, Fox Film was hesitant about releasing the film under the credit “Released by Fox Film Corporation,” fearing the possibility that “arrogant North China” might decide to boycott the

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Frank Harris to W. R. Fraser, 7 December 1934, *The Cat’s Paw* file, Harold Lloyd Papers.

company, just as they had done with Paramount.⁴³ The irony here is that, even though the Chinese had explicitly expressed their resentment at the film, which they considered offensive and untruthful, the white Hollywood producers stubbornly held on to the idea that Chinese officials were overreacting, and that the companies concerned might actually make profits from the film once the Chinese public were offered the chance to watch it – a sense of “we-know-better-than-you” reflected in the companies’ distribution strategies in China.⁴⁴ The incident revolved around *The Cat’s Paw* demonstrated a complete failure of understanding between China and the Hollywood studios.

In 1936, when Paramount got in trouble with the Chinese government for the second time by making a “warlord” film called *The General Died at Dawn* (1936), Colonel Frederick L. (“Ted”) Herron, Head of the Foreign Department of the MPPDA, wrote a long letter to Breen expressing his concerns over the “Chinese situation” the movie industry was now facing. Herron believed that Hollywood lacked knowledge of the real situation of Chinese people both in their home country and in the US. He commented, for example, that there were still many Chinese characters shown in 1930s films with long queues in spite of the fact that such a hairstyle had been ordered to be removed after the overthrow of the Qing Empire in 1912.⁴⁵ Herron believed that representations of Chinese people in such ways made it understandable why many Hollywood productions were resented by the Chinese government. His letter suggested his awareness of the existence of collaborations between other foreign governments and China on film censorship, and he argued that *The Cat’s Paw* incident in Rome was not an exceptional case:

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Chung, *Hollywood Diplomacy*, p. 1375 (Kindle version).

⁴⁵ Frederick L. Herron to Joseph I. Breen, 16 April 1936, *The General Died at Dawn* file, PCA file.

You must remember that not only are we affected in China with regard to the distribution of such product, but that all the Chinese diplomatic and Consular officers throughout the world are given instructions by their home government to protest to the governments they are accredited to, against the showing of such pictures objected by them in these other foreign countries of the world.⁴⁶

Herron stressed, at the end of his letter, that “it is a deep dent in the box office receipts for world circulation of any picture that runs counter to the ideas of the Chinese.”⁴⁷ As Ruth Vasey remarks, “although China’s contribution to the American companies’ foreign revenue was minuscule, its cultivation of diplomatic channels of protest had a significant impact on the industry.”⁴⁸ It is certainly true that the Chinese Nationalist government, during this period, endeavoured to use its diplomatic power to influence Hollywood, and it did succeed to some extent, including forcing studios to negotiate terms with it, to suspend circulations of offensive films in certain countries, and to apologise to and promise the Chinese government not to produce similar offensive films in the future. However, these actions were mainly damage-control solutions for Hollywood studios. They rarely had an impact on the actual cinematic constructions of China and the Chinese in American films. Even though Chinese consuls around the world were fully backed by their home government, Hollywood studios always found ways to circumvent consuls’ objections instead of making significant changes to the images of Chinese people in their pictures. The image of China on American movie screens, it will be argued here, stayed virtually constant throughout the 1930s until the United States entered World War II (the consequences of which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood*, pp. 154-155.

Despite Hollywood's perfunctory appeasement of Chinese officials when they expressed their concern, however, the industry did genuinely desire to maintain a good relationship with the Chinese, whose own fledgling film industry seemed to promise that the country might become a profitable market in the future. Hollywood, like many other American industries, believed that China, if properly cultivated, could become an invaluable market (with 400 million customers) for American exports. In fact, *Commerce Reports* (a publication of the US Department of Commerce) had been reporting on the motion picture industry in China (from ticket prices to people's preferences) for years before that industry really began to take off in the 1930s. In the issue for 3 April 1922, for example, *Commerce Reports* profiled what it regarded as popular Chinese tastes:

"The Chinese like films with plenty of action," said an American motion-picture man in Shanghai. They also have a highly developed sense of humor. Exciting serial dramas and boisterous comedies appeal to them most, but not society or problem plays. News films, especially those containing animated cartoons, are popular. The regulation program consists of a comedy, a news films, and a five-reel feature.⁴⁹

Over the years, *Commerce Reports* had been providing information on various aspects of China's film market, from America's opportunities in Chinese cities (especially Tianjin, Xiamen, Shanghai, and Canton) to censorships in different regions, from theatre capacities to China's own development of a motion picture industry. *Trade Information Bulletins* (another publication by the U. S. Department of Commerce) also had special issues explaining the nature of China's motion picture market. In their 1930 issue titled "Motion Pictures in China," it elaborated on new developments in China since 1927 in "film production,

⁴⁹ "Motion Pictures in China" (3 April 1922), *Commerce Reports*, publications of the Department of Commerce in RG 287, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

distribution, construction of new theatres, censorship, taxation, and especially the popularity of sound pictures.”⁵⁰

All these evidences from Department of Commerce publications suggest that the US had high hopes that China would become a lucrative film market for the American film industry, and such expectations only intensified from the mid-1930s when the Chinese film industry itself showed rapid growth. An article in the *Motion Picture Herald* in 1936 celebrated the fact that “foreign motion pictures in China have experienced one of the best month [sic] in at least three years ... 168 new features by the eight major American distributors have been submitted to the Chinese censors at Nanking ... only one picture (*East of Java* [1935] by Universal⁵¹) has been completely banned.”⁵² Later, in February 1937, another article in the *Motion Picture Herald* even expressed concern that improved Chinese domestic film productions might now be outstripping Hollywood products in terms of profits:

one well-known native film executive has said that at least one [Chinese] producer will show a net income of over c. \$1,000,000, with others not far under that figure ... Comparing this with the estimate net return of American films, which is sent out to China about c.\$1,500,000 for all the eight large American distributors.⁵³

No-one at this point could have foreseen the siege of both Shanghai and Nanking (two of China’s biggest film markets in the 1930s) by Japanese invaders in November and December 1937, which changed not only the Chinese film industry but many other aspects of Chinese

⁵⁰ “Motion Pictures in China,” October 1930, *Trade Information Bulletins*, publications of the Department of Commerce in RG 287, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

⁵¹ George Melford, *East of Java* (Universal Pictures, 1935). The film, though it is not about China, does contain an unsympathetic Chinese character Captain Wong Bo (Leslie Fenton).

⁵² J. P. Koehler, “Foreign Films in China Show Best Six Months in Last Three Years,” *Motion Picture Herald* (12 September 1936).

⁵³ “Improved Chinese Product Makes Heavy Inroad into Foreign Profit,” *Motion Picture Herald* (20 February 1937).

life. But until early 1937, at least, China was still regarded by many as an emerging market with almost unlimited possibilities.

“Steadily, surely,” film critic Gus McCarthy noted rhetorically in 1937, “the needle of Hollywood’s production compass is swinging toward the East, toward China, imponderable, traditionally unfathomable land of cheap life, implacable destiny, high adventure and slow, fantastic death.”⁵⁴ Since the mid-1930s, more and more big-budgeted films about China had been produced, synchronising with the American public’s increasing curiosity about Far Eastern affairs and Hollywood’s growing interest in the Chinese film market. For example, an MGM film called *China Seas* (1935), starring Clark Gable (a highly bankable star in 1935 after his big success in Frank Capra’s Oscar-winning screwball comedy *It Happened One Night* a year earlier), had become the 8th best-grossing film of the year.⁵⁵ This one-hundred-percent American story was set on a tramp steamer sailing between Hong Kong and Singapore – constructing China only as a vague and incidental background to provide some zing and zest to the story. Even this, however, seemed enough to attract and impress American audiences, and the film achieved satisfactory financial returns – it grossed 2.8 million dollars worldwide with a profit of 653,000 dollars.⁵⁶ This stereotypical presentation of China as a distant, luxurious, and timeless locale – a perfect escapist destination – may have spoken to the needs and tastes of Depression-worn American moviegoers. Amongst other high-budgeted, popular and financially successful films of this time about China were *Lost Horizon* (1937) and *The Good Earth* (1937).⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Gus McCarthy, “General Died at Dawn,” *Motion Picture Herald* (15 August 1936), p. 16.

⁵⁵ Tay Garnett, *China Seas* (MGM, 1935); Frank Capra, *It Happened One Night* (Columbia Pictures, 1934); “Box Office Champion,” *International Motion Picture Almanac, 1936-37* (1937).

⁵⁶ Scott Eyman, *Lion of Hollywood: The Life and Legend of Louis B. Mayer* (London: Robson Books, 2005), p. 156.

⁵⁷ As early as 1931, two years before MGM became interested, a Chinese film company proposed to the Chinese censor to make Buck’s *The Good Earth* into a film. However, the project was rejected by the Chinese government because it believed that the story did not

Shangri-La or Predicament?: The “Real” China in *Lost Horizon* and *The Good Earth*

Lost Horizon (1937) was a famous escapist film about China produced by director Frank Capra.⁵⁸ Based on James Hilton’s novel with the same title, the film tells the story of a group of westerners, led by a British officer Robert Conway (Ronald Colman), who “accidentally” enter a utopia called Shangri-La, hidden in the mountains of the Himalayas, after an airplane crash while being evacuated from a fictional war-torn Chinese city called Baskul. Although the exact location of Shangri-La is unclear, Hilton’s book indicated that it was somewhere beyond the Himalayas towards the heights of Kunlun, mountain chains located in western China in Xinjiang and Qinghai provinces along the border with Tibet. The setting of Shangri-La reflects the wider western fantasy of China as a mythical existence far away from the entire western world, which served very well as an escapist destination for Hollywood during the Great Depression.

After the group arrive at Shangri-La, a Chinese man named Chang (H. B. Warner) invites them to live in an opulent lamasery (itself a term commonly used to denote a monastery where Buddhist Tibetan monks – *lamas* – live), and they are amazed by the extravagant lifestyle they see on offer there—spacious rooms, elegantly embroidered clothes, and nourishing dainties they have never seen before. During his stay, Conway realises that the place runs in an unbelievably idealised way: the indigenous inhabitants live a rustic and idyllic life, and they are content as servants of the western newcomers, and all the residents in Shangri-La seems to live at their prime for an exceedingly long time—the American girl, Gloria Stone (Isabel Jewell), even begins to recover from a terminal illness after arriving in

present the best sides of the Chinese life. See: Zhiwei Xiao, “Nationalism, Orientalism, and an Unequal Treaties of Ethnography: The Making of *The Good Earth*,” in Susie Lan Cassel, *The Chinese in America: A History from Gold Mountain to the New Millennium* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2002), p. 278.

⁵⁸ Frank Capra, *Lost Horizon* (Columbia Pictures, 1937).

Shangri-La. When Conway finally makes acquaintance with the High Lama (Sam Jaffe), the two-hundred-years-old leader of Shangri-La, he learns the surprising news that the High Lama was originally a Catholic priest from Belgium, and the group's entrance to this utopian world has all been pre-planned by him. Conway—an ideal candidate for the position, who possesses knowledge of the western world—has been chosen by the High Lama to be his successor in order to perpetuate Shangri-La. Shocked by the truth, Conway runs away with his brother George (John Howard) and Maria (Margo), a girl George falls in love with after arriving in Shangri-La. After they leave the lamasery, however, Maria ages rapidly and soon dies from natural causes. Witnessing Maria's death, George loses his mind and commits suicide. Robert Conway carries on with his escape, but the huge emotional blow he has experienced erases his memory about the hidden utopia after he is finally rescued by a search group. However, on his way back to the UK, Conway begins to regain his memory. He tells his story to the rescuers and then hastens back to Tibet and disappears in the mountains of the Himalayas. Conway becomes a legend in the western world and Shangri-La the heaven people yearn for. The film ends with a sequence showing that the bearded Conway, who apparently has experienced all possible trials and tribulations, has finally re-discovered the great lama monastery in the Himalayas.

Lost Horizon is, in all senses, an escapist film, not only because the leading characters are physically removed from a relatively contemporary western setting and placed in a distant eastern environment, and the male protagonist, in the end, literally escapes the western world to return to Tibet. But the film also presents Shangri-La as an agrarian utopia in an era when the US, in reality, was suffering from the Great Depression and a series of natural disasters. Beginning in the early 30s, a series of dust storms – the Dust Bowl – hit America's prairie areas (including Colorado, Kansas, the panhandles of Texas and Oklahoma, and New Mexico), and a huge number of people (commonly referred as "Okies") from Oklahoma and

other affected neighbouring states migrated to the west, with most heading for California.

Shangri-La in *Lost Horizon* offered a complete contrast to the reality which many Americans lived in, presenting an idealised world free of all the economic and ecological difficulties experienced by Americans in the 1930s. Reviewer Mae Tinee acutely remarked in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* that:

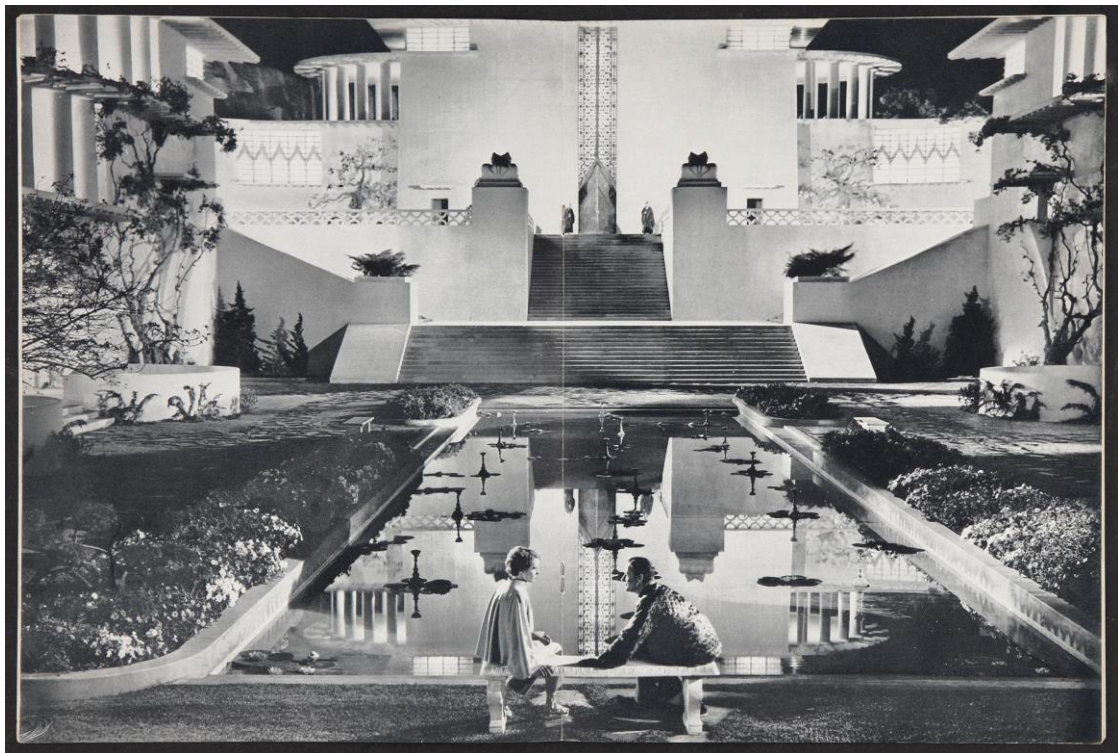
While the narrative [of *Lost Horizon*] has the dream quality, it is not a dream; it is, rather, a yearning, imaginative reaching out on the part of the author for what he would like to see materialize in the way of a Utopian refuge from storms and wars and general world confusion.⁵⁹



(Figure 4.2: A shot of the indigenous people's rustic lifestyle, being observed/admired by the protagonist Conway in *Lost Horizon*)

⁵⁹ Mae Tinee, "'Lost Horizon' Enters Circle of Great Films," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (15 March 1937).

The fictional Shangri-La is set in Tibet—a land that never experienced western colonisation — making it seem very much an unwesternised location to American audiences. Capra made huge efforts visually to romanticise Shangri-La, showing the exotic and opulent decoration of the Tibetan lama monastery as well as its dream-like natural surroundings. According to Mayme Peak in the *Daily Boston Globe*, “Architects made special trips to study the magnificent Tibetan lamasery, Shangri-La built on the set. Gardens, pools, age-mellowed walls looked as if they had been there for centuries.”⁶⁰ In presenting the Himalayan mountains, a special camera crew was sent to Switzerland by Capra to take sweeping panoramas of snow-capped Alps.⁶¹ A magnificent, extravagant, archaic and timeless eastern setting was consequently visualised and given material form by director Capra based on the author Hilton’s original descriptions in his book.



(Figure 4.3: The Grand Lamasery in the film)

⁶⁰ Mayme Peak, “Hollywood is Asking: Is ‘Lost Horizon’ Lost in Hollywood?”, *Daily Boston Globe* (5 February 1937).

⁶¹ “‘Lost Horizon’ Played in an Icehouse: Coleman, Wyatt, Horton and Others Shivered for Weeks on End Filming Story,” *The Hartford Courant* (22 March 1937).

Columbia, the studio that produced the film, claimed that hundreds of Chinese extras had been used in the film. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, “more than a quarter of the Chinese population of Los Angeles was converted into motion-picture atmosphere for ten days by Frank Capra during the shooting of the Baskul revolt scenes in ‘Lost Horizon’ ...”⁶² It was also reported that many California Mission Indians appeared in the film as Tibetans for “they have the same moderately high cheek-bones, the thin pointed noses and the identical complexions.”⁶³ The studio’s deliberate emphasis in its publicity on the number of Chinese extras employed and the time and money invested to reproduce Tibet were essentially just to impress potential movie-goers. However, they also appeared to suggest that there was a certain level of “reality” in the film based on the degree of effort the film crew had made to recreate China. Yet none of the Chinese extras was given a single line to speak—their ethnicity was merely exploited in the picture to bring out a greater sense of otherworldliness and exoticism, while the only important Chinese character (Chang) in the film was played by English actor H. B. Warner, who was later nominated for the Best Supporting Actor at the Oscars for his characterisation as a Chinese man in the film.

From the setting of the story to the casting of roles, the overall representation of the East in *Lost Horizon* was from what by this stage in Hollywood had become a very traditional and stereotypical perspective. The Chinese people who appeared in the film were shown as faceless hordes of barbarians. Reviewer Mae Tinee commented on the opening scene in the fictional Chinese city of Baskul, in which the greatest number of Chinese people appear, that: “Surrounded by frantic natives, a small group of civilised folks finally manage to board a plane ...”⁶⁴ The western travellers were intentionally distinguished as sane and “civilised” from the animal-like Chinese mob—a presentation that condescendingly implied that the

⁶² “‘Lost Horizon’ Uses Many Chinese Characters,” *Los Angeles Times* (3 May 1937).

⁶³ “Reproducing Tibet in ‘Lost Horizon’”, *Daily Boston Globe* (18 April 1937).

⁶⁴ Mae Tinee, “‘Lost Horizon’ Enters Circle of Great Films.”

“anarchic” Chinese were in great need of some kind of western leadership. Furthermore, in Shangri-La, a western former-Catholic missionary ironically becomes the highest teacher of Tibetan Buddhism. The indigenous people naturally obey the racial hierarchy set up by the white man—the westerner runs the utopia while the easterners (as servants) are content living under such an order. The East here is depicted as beautiful, fertile and submissive: a region that is not only willing to be conquered, cultivated, and ruled by a western man, but also allows him, using his discretion, to hand Shangri-La over to a younger westerner as his chosen successor. The ending of the film showing Conway deciding to give up the West and go back to the East simultaneously expresses on the one hand an ultimately escapist message, and on the other a continuing implicit justification for western imperialistic impulses in the Far East—suggesting the latter to be both pre-destined and irresistible.

Lost Horizon, according to one industry source, became one of the blockbusters of the time, reaching the all-time best-sellers list by making \$1,500,000 at the box office.⁶⁵ The film was nominated for seven Academy awards and won Best Art Direction (Stephen Goosson) and Best Film Editing (Gene Havlick and Gene Milford).⁶⁶ *Lost Horizon* was applauded by many as one of the best pictures ever made, especially for the magnificent set that had been built for it. Critic William Lyon Phelps praised the film as the best picture he had ever watched, and wrote that he admired “the dignity and beauty and grandeur and excitement of the screen-play.”⁶⁷ *The Christian Science Monitor* invited four hundred newsboys to select one film they would watch at a special party, and they decided upon *Lost Horizon*, whose

⁶⁵ “Box Office Champion,” *International Motion Picture Almanac*, 1936-37.

⁶⁶ *Lost Horizon* was nominated for Best Actor in a Supporting Role (H. B. Warner), Art Direction (Stephen Goosson), Assistant Director (C. C. Coleman, Jr.), Film Editing (Gene Havlick and Gene Milford), Music, Outstanding Production (Columbia), and Sound Recording. Retrieved from: <http://awardsdatabase.oscars.org/search/results>

⁶⁷ William Lyon Phelps, “Best Motion Picture: ‘Lost Horizon’”, *The Washington Post* (18 May 1937).

theme was claimed by the newsboys (possibly with some journalistic aid) to be based upon “the highest ideals of kindness, moderation and brotherhood.”⁶⁸ People from different walks of life apparently had different ideas about the film, but many of them agreed on one aspect—the admiration for the aesthetic quality shown in the portrayal of the utopian Shangri-La. The fictional paradise spoke to many because it was opportune in the historical context of the Depression years in which it was produced. It also expressed many Americans’ ultimate fantasy about the Far East as a mysterious, appealingly exotic and even magical destination.

1937 was a crucial year in terms of Hollywood’s representations of China. Besides *Lost Horizon*, *The Good Earth* (1937), another all-time best-selling film was also released. *The Good Earth* was shot in two countries and took three directors and more than three years to complete. The making of the film required an unprecedented level of co-operation and interaction between the American film industry and the Chinese Nationalist government.⁶⁹ The film itself centred on a Chinese peasant family’s enduring battles with poverty and natural disasters against the background of China’s own plight in the first two decades of the twentieth century and it foregrounded a strong female character. In many ways, *The Good Earth* represented a ground-breaking milestone in Hollywood’s history of representing China.

The Making of *The Good Earth* (1937)

The Good Earth was an MGM adaption of Pearl S. Buck’s acclaimed novel of the same title, published in 1931. Buck was an influential American author and one of the only two women in history who won both Pulitzer and Nobel prizes. In a 1966 Gallup Poll, Buck was

⁶⁸ “‘Lost Horizon’ Choice of Boys as Best Movie,” *The Christian Science Monitor* (30 April 1937).

⁶⁹ “The All-Time Best Sellers,” *International Motion Picture Almanac, 1938-39* (1939); Sidney Franklin, *The Good Earth* (MGM, 1937).

ranked as one of “The Ten Most Admired Women” in the United States. She was also judged by James Thomson, a leading US-Asian relations scholar, to have influenced “more people on the subject of China than any non-Chinese writer since Marco Polo in the thirteenth century.”⁷⁰ Buck was considered a credible American expert on China and the Chinese people in the twentieth century mainly because of her background—she was a missionary child, who was taken to China as a three-month-old infant by her parents in 1892, and had spent her entire childhood in the country until 1910, when she went back to the United States to pursue a college education. Buck returned to China after her graduation and lived there until 1933.⁷¹

As a consequence of her long stay in China and intimate contact with the people, her attitude toward the country had changed over the years from that of the traditional, near-condescending missionary view to a more sympathetic and Sinophilic one. From the 1940s to the time of her death in 1973, as Grant Wacker noted, Buck became increasingly defensive of Chinese traditions, values, and philosophies, and she even developed a much more critical view of foreign missions in China and the Christian religion more generally. Although Buck eschewed the label atheist, she claimed that “I feel no need for any other faith than my faith in human beings.”⁷² Acculturation on the same lines as Buck’s happened to many Sinophile American intellectuals who had stayed in China and had close contact with Chinese people. For example, John Dewey, the philosopher and Columbia University professor, and his wife Alice visited China in 1919 (originally only for a short stay after a holiday in Japan) and were enraptured by the country, ultimately staying there for two years. During Dewey’s time in China, he made connections with many Chinese intellectuals while introducing his

⁷⁰ Grant Wacker, “Pearl S. Buck and the Waning of the Missionary Impulse,” *Church History* (Cambridge University Press, December 2003), p. 856.

⁷¹ Karen J. Leong, *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 14-17.

⁷² Wacker, “Pearl S. Buck and the Waning of the Missionary Impulse,” pp. 864-65.

philosophy of pragmatism to the Chinese. His adherents included Hu Shi—a Boxer Indemnity Scholarship-sponsored student at Columbia University, who later became a famous Chinese philosopher and diplomat—and the young Mao Zedong, who was enchanted by pragmatism but later turned to Marxism-Leninism.⁷³

During the Deweys' stay in China, they enjoyed the culture, food, and the personalities of the Chinese, claiming at one point that “everyone who stays here gets more or less Chinafied.” The Deweys' writings, including a collection of letters sent back to the U.S., were published by their daughter in 1920. They offered a significantly different slant on the country to the accounts published earlier by missionaries.⁷⁴ Coincidentally, both Buck and the Deweys expressed their admiration for the candour and earthiness of the Chinese people. The Deweys compared the Chinese to the Japanese and believed that the Chinese were more easy-going and open-minded despite their more “boisterous” characteristics.⁷⁵ Buck, also, more than once expressed her nostalgia for the earthy and “unwesternized” China that, realistically, she herself had never known. Unlike the children of other missionaries who tended to support Chinese Christian generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek (American magazine magnate Henry Luce, for example, born to a Presbyterian missionary couple in China, would put Chiang on the cover of *Time* magazine more than ten times from 1927 to 1955), Buck publicly criticised Chiang's government, while dismissing the whole missionary project as a wrong choice for the country.⁷⁶ *The Good Earth*, as her most prestigious novel, manifested her understanding of the country and the people's candour that she adored, if not the Chinese agrarian culture and way of living—the “unwesternized” China—that she yearned for.

⁷³ Hu Shi was appointed as the Chinese Ambassador to the United States between 1938 and 1942.

⁷⁴ Chang, *Fateful Ties*, 124-26.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ David A. Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed American* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 32.

The Good Earth tells a story of the plight of a Chinese peasant family—including the natural disasters they contend with and their own family dynamics—against a backdrop of China’s political turmoil at the beginning of the twentieth century. MGM became interested in turning the story into a film as early as 1933, and when it was finally completed in 1937, the film became one of the “blockbusters” of the time. However, the production of the film did not go smoothly from the start. The making of the film was almost as dramatic as the storyline itself. According to critic Mae Tinee, “Twenty writers were called in for the adaption of book and stage play. Three directors ministered at the birth. The first, George Hill, who went to China for a boatload of properties, committed suicide. The second, Victor Fleming, came down with malaria. Sidney Franklin finished the job. Then Irving Thalberg [the film’s producer] died, leaving to Al Lewin the worries and decisions of production.”⁷⁷ Besides the personnel changes within the crew, the shooting work was also much more challenging than usual because MGM planned to take some footage in China to increase the visual authenticity of the picture and make it appear even more of an epic. According to *The Regulations for the Foreign Film Productions in China*, introduced in 1932 by the Chinese Nationalist Government, foreign film companies had to apply for permission from Chinese officials in order to shoot footage in China. The making of the picture consequently involved diplomatic relations from the very beginning when MGM sought approval from the Chinese Embassy in Washington, D. C. The latter referred the matter directly to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Nanking.⁷⁸

MGM got off to a rough start with the Nationalists because, initially, the company’s first

⁷⁷ Mae Tinee, “‘Good Earth’ Film Triumph for Luise Rainer: Role Holds You as Movie Goes ‘Super-Super’”, *Chicago Daily Tribune* (22 February 1937).

⁷⁸ Xiao, “Nationalism, Orientalism, and an Unequal Treaties of Ethnography,” p. 277.

submission for approval to shoot in China was turned down by the Chinese government.⁷⁹ This rejection from Chinese officials was not particularly surprising since an earlier request for making *The Good Earth* made by a Chinese (Shanghai) film company had also been denied in 1931 because “the plot (of the novel) wrongly presents Chinese life to the world and is viewed as disgraceful to the country.”⁸⁰ With the regulations of the National Board of Film Censors (NBFC) in place, a foreign film company such as MGM negotiating about making a controversial film about China was likely to find itself in an even more complicated situation. Chinese nationalism had begun to develop ever since the early 1910s after the Qing regime was overthrown. By the 1930s, there was a strong public voice in China in favour of boycotting foreign films that were considered insulting to the Chinese people. The Chinese Nationalist Government, therefore, was itself under tremendous pressure and close scrutiny from the Chinese press and young protesters. When MGM made the decision to shoot *The Good Earth* in China, the Chinese press was the first to be alerted, and they expressed two main concerns. Firstly, many critics did not like the original novel in principle because, they reasoned, elements like slavery (O-Lan, the female protagonist was a slave of a rich Manchurian family before marrying Wang Lung, the male protagonist), endless natural disasters, unstable political situations, and illiterate farmers in the story presented the worst sides of China. Wu Lifu, the first man to translate Buck’s book into Chinese, even questioned the book’s imperialist impulse: “in writing all this does the author not have some sense of white supremacy and propose saving China through invading it?”⁸¹

Secondly, the Chinese press also questioned the capability of American producers properly to represent China to the world, considering their long history of depicting China in

⁷⁹ “Why Celebrities Opposed *The Good Earth*,” *Diansheng* (March 1934), p. 19. From Haoyu Gong’s “The Boycotting Movement against ‘Anti-Chinese’ Films in the 1930s, *The Good Earth*,” *Beijing Film Academy* (May 2011), p. 34. (My translation).

⁸⁰ Xiao, “Nationalism, Orientalism, and an Unequal Treaties of Ethnography,” p. 278.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

a derogatory or fanciful way. MGM, however, foreseeing the obstacles it might run into with Chinese officials, craftily came up with a counterplan to push the Nationalists to accept its proposal. The studio submitted an appendix with the application to the Chinese government claiming that, even if their proposal was rejected, they would make the film anyway but shoot the footage they wanted in South Asia. The Chinese press became worried when it learned about the existence of the appendix: although they did much not like *The Good Earth*, they were even more anxious about the film being produced entirely out of sight and totally “unsupervised.” The Nationalist government, therefore after much reconsideration, decided to withdraw its disapproval and begin a series of negotiations with MGM about the proposed production.⁸² There were also rumours that George Hill, the first director of the film, personally approached Madame Chiang (a graduate from Wesleyan College, Georgia), whose American educational background allowed her to appreciate Buck’s novel more, to help MGM obtain the permit to shoot through her personal intervention with generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek.⁸³

The terms of the ultimate agreement between MGM and the Chinese authorities in 1933 were finally revealed in 1937:

First, the film should present a truthful and pleasant picture of China and her people; Second, the Chinese Government can appoint its representatives to supervise the picture in its making; Third, MGM should accept as much as possible of the Chinese supervisors’ suggestions; Fourth, if the Chinese Government decides to ask a preface to the picture, MGM undertakes to do accordingly; Fifth, all shots taken by MGM staff in China must be passed by the Chinese censors for their export; Sixth, the Chinese Government hopes that the cast in the picture will be all Chinese.⁸⁴

⁸² Gong, “The Boycotting Movement against ‘Anti-Chinese’ Films in the 1930s,” p. 34. (My translation).

⁸³ Xiao, “Nationalism, Orientalism, and an Unequal Treaties of Ethnography,” p. 278.

⁸⁴ Motion Picture Notes submitted by H. B. Howard (the Assistant Trade Commissioner), 8 May 1937, *The Good Earth* file, PCA files.

Based on these agreed points, General Tu Hsiu-ting (杜修庭) was sent to Hollywood on 17 July 1934, after the shooting in China was finished, as the Chinese representative designated by the publicity department of the Central Kuomintang Headquarters. Unfortunately, only a month after Tu's arrival, the production of the film was suspended due to Hill's suicide on 10 August 1934. Meanwhile, other studios started to take advantage of Tu's presence in Hollywood (as an official representative of the Chinese government) and paid him for consultations on other films that dealt with China and things Chinese—Tu's advisory activities in Hollywood would subsequently be recorded in these films' production files in the PCA collections. For example, in a letter found in *The General Died at Dawn* file, from John Hammell (Paramount's in-house liaison officer with the Breen office) to Breen, complaining about Colonel Frederick L. Herron's accusations regarding the studio's inconsiderate treatments of Chinese characters in the film, Hammell wrote that:

It might be of interest to Major [sic] Herron to know that for *General Died at Dawn* we secured the services of General Tu, officially accredited representative of the Nanking Government, to MGM, in the making of *The Good Earth*, and the making of our picture was at all times under his guidance.⁸⁵

Tu was quite active in Hollywood during the years he stayed there. Besides working for different studios, the press sometimes interviewed him as a credible source about China and the Chinese. Despite Tu's active involvement in Hollywood, however, his job as an advisor turned out to be a disappointment to both the Chinese Nationalist government and the studios he worked with. Tu was very open-minded about Hollywood's representations of the

⁸⁵ John Hammell to Joseph I. Breen, 14 September 1937, *The General Died at Dawn* file, the PCA files.

Chinese: he found most of the portrayals inoffensive while many of these would, in reality, come to be considered unacceptable by the Chinese authorities. Tu's open-mindedness was counterproductive or even problematic as a film adviser. For example, Paramount's consultation with Tu about *The General Died at Dawn* was absolutely useless in terms of preventing the company from being banned by the Chinese government for the second time. This "ineffectualness" of Tu in Hollywood irritated the Chinese press and his capacity to undertake the job at all was seriously questioned.⁸⁶ In 1936, Tu was replaced by Huang Chao-chin (黄朝琴) under a joint decision made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of the Interior in China.⁸⁷

Huang was quite diligent in his job as the new representative. He not only provided personal suggestions to MGM but also invited famous Chinese intellectuals to view *The Good Earth* with him and asked for their opinions. The final list of deletions/reductions Huang provided included the use of the word "slave" in many scenes, the suggestion that the main character Lung was unhygienic (he takes a bath on his wedding day but mentions he hasn't washed himself since the new year), cannibalism during the famine, and an implication of incest.⁸⁸ Some of these suggestions were genuinely adopted by MGM but most of them would not be found in the special version of the film MGM made for China. They remained, however, in versions for other countries. *The Good Earth* in its Chinese version was approved by the Chinese Film Censor Board in 1937 and made its debut in Shanghai in the same year.

During the three years of production, MGM had been immensely patient with Chinese officials. In addition to that, MGM also planned strategically for a smooth censorship procedure with the Chinese authorities months before submitting the complete film to

⁸⁶ Xiao, "Nationalism, Orientalism, and an Unequal Treaties of Ethnography," pp. 279-80.

⁸⁷ Gong, "The Boycotting Movement against 'Anti-Chinese' Films in the 1930s," p. 36. (My translation).

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 37.

Nanjing, including visiting the office of the Commercial Attaché in China to talk through how to get the film passed by the Nanjing censors, and giving much publicity in the Chinese press to the fact that “the picture had been made with a representative of the Chinese Government present during the months of filming, and that Metro was cooperating to the fullest extent to the wishes and advice of the Chinese representative in order to gain the approval of the Nanking Government.”⁸⁹ In a letter addressing to George Weltner, a Paramount officer, discussing MGM’s tactical strategies to get *The Good Earth* released in China, it was noted that:

A preview of the picture was given before the Chinese Ambassador in Washington and screenings were set up before the Chinese Consuls in Los Angeles and San Francisco. All of this was done to bring such data to the attention of the Central Film Censorship Board in Nanking as well as the Chairman of the Central Publicity Committee in Peiping. With all of that preparation you will realize that if the picture had been banned in the face of the comments of approval given by the Chinese high in authority, and in spite of the government’s official representative in the Metro studio, there would have been very good background for a protest. As it was the picture went through in fine shape in spite of the fact that it contains many of the things that have been objected to in other pictures.⁹⁰

The studio’s patience and efforts paid off in the sense that both the Chinese authorities and the press appreciated MGM’s apparent respect for Chinese people’s feelings and, therefore, the Chinese government did not harass the studio with demands for any further revisions. Ironically, however, a film involving this level of preparation and negotiation actually contains many elements (as indicated in the letter) that would have been found

⁸⁹ Letter to George Weltner, 10 June 1937, *The Good Earth* file, PCA files. (The author of the letter is unknown).

⁹⁰ Ibid.

objectionable by Chinese officials if identified in other films. In fact, the final version of *The Good Earth* did not even meet all the requests in the pre-production agreement of 1933 — only four out of six clauses were met. The fourth item in the agreement (the insertion of a preface) was accepted by the Chinese as unnecessary; the sixth item about using an all-Chinese cast, which was also insisted upon by original author Buck as crucial, “was found impracticable.”⁹¹ Although a completely Chinese story happening in China, all the major roles of *The Good Earth*, especially the male and female protagonists, were played by white actors and actresses with yellow-face make-up. Although the reception of the film in the US was very positive in general, some reviewers still believed that the original quality of Buck’s novel was lost because it was “almost impossible to recreate these without a native Chinese cast.”⁹²

The film itself was set in 1900s China, where a slave girl O-Lan (Luise Rainer) is bought by Wang Lung (Paul Muni), a poor farmer, from the Great House (a residence owned by a member of the Manchurian gentry where O-Lan works as a kitchen servant). O-Lan’s arrival at Wang’s brings hope to the impoverished family—she becomes a perfect wife in the household, taking care of Wang and his father, bearing Wang’s children, and working as a farmhand. The peasant family leads a simple and happy life for years until a famine (caused by a severe drought) hits their village and people begin to starve. In their hour of desperation, Wang’s greedy relatives show up at their door to offer to purchase their land at one-tenth of the price it is worth. The enfeebled O-Lan, who has been tortured by hunger, for the first time speaks up for the family, declining the offer and insisting, almost religiously, on keeping the

⁹¹ Motion pictures notes, submitted by H. B. Howard, Assistant Trade Commissioner, 8 May 1937, *The Good Earth* file, PCA files.

⁹² Edwin Schallert, “‘Good Earth’ Triumphs at Carthay Premiere,” *Los Angeles Times* (30 January 1937).

land and going south. “The land is our life,” O-Lan claims, “And it’s better to go south or die walking than to give it to you (the relatives) for nothing.”

During their migration to the south, the Wang family begs and steals in order to survive until a revolution breaks out in the city where they are temporarily staying. O-Lan joins the mob to loot a mansion and picks up a small bag of jewels, which brings the family its second chance to start over. Years later, Wang has become the wealthiest man in his hometown, owning many lands as well as the Great House, where the family now resides. However, great wealth corrodes Wang’s morality, and he marries a second wife called Lotus (Tilly Losch), a Sing-song girl (courtesan) from a teahouse. The family begins to fall apart, especially after Wang finds out about the affair between Lotus and his youngest son. On the brink of the family’s destruction, however, a locust plague comes to the village, and Wang Lung and his sons have to fight the disaster shoulder to shoulder to protect their harvest. Realising just how important the land is to him, Wang finally returns to his senses. In the final sequence, Wang sits next to O-Lan on her deathbed, regretting and confessing all his wrongdoings over the years. After she peacefully passes away, Wang wanders to the thriving peach tree O-Lan planted on their wedding night and says “O-Lan, you are the earth.”

When *The Good Earth* was about to be made in 1933, rumour had it that MGM would cast Anna May Wong for the leading role of O-Lan. Being the most famous Chinese-American star in Hollywood in the 1930s, Wong began her career in the silent era and was “discovered” owing to her performance in the film *The Toll of the Sea* (1922) as Lotus Flower (the name which was later adapted as a stereotype of the beautiful but tragical oriental women who usually falls for and is willing to sacrifice herself for Euro-American heroes).⁹³ *The Toll of the Sea*, though a low-budget film, demonstrated the new dye-transfer techniques used by the Technicolor company in motion picture production, and consequently was widely

⁹³ Chester M. Franklin, *The Toll of the Sea* (Technicolor Motion Picture Corporation, 1922).

viewed by professionals in the film industry. Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., the American actor and producer who was impressed by Wong's performance in the film, later offered her the role of a scheming and hyper-sexualised Mongol slave girl in his film *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924).⁹⁴ This image of an exotic, sensual, and treacherous Oriental woman in many ways became Wong's curse and it foreshadowed the major type of roles offered to her for many years, for example Fu Manchu's daughter in *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931) and Hui Fei in *Shanghai Express* (1932). The character she commonly played (later known as the "Dragon Lady") became a stereotype of Chinese women, and still at times appears in modern films. Wong herself was frustrated that such a career limitation had come about through Hollywood's racial prejudice.⁹⁵

At the same time, the press in China was also hostile to Wong and saw her work as humiliating to the Chinese race. According to an article from a Chinese journal in 1931: "Her (Anna May Wong)'s specialty is to expose the conduct of the very low class of Chinese, such as when she played the part of a half-nude Chinese maid in *Thief of Bagdad*. Although she is deficient in artistic portrayal, she has done more than enough to disgrace the Chinese race."⁹⁶ General Tu, the first Chinese adviser to supervise the production of *The Good Earth*, also remarked when asked by American press about Chinese people's impression of Wong:

Very bad. Whenever she appears in a film, the newspapers print her picture with the caption: "Anna May Wong again loses face for China." I feel sorry for her ... because I realize that she has to play the part assigned her. It is the *parts* China objects to. She is

⁹⁴ Raoul Walsh, *The Thief of Bagdad* (United Artists, 1924); Leong, *The China Mystique*, 63.

⁹⁵ For more detailed information about Wong's early career in Hollywood, see Graham Russell Gao Hodges, *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman's Daughter to Hollywood Legend* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), pp. 27-63.

⁹⁶ *Pictorial Weekly*, "Paramount Utilizes Anna May Wong to Produce Picture to Disgrace China" (5 December 1931) (This article was an English translation of the original Chinese version.), *Shanghai Express* file, PCA files.

always a slave—a *very undressed slave*. China resents having its womanhood so represented.⁹⁷

Wong did, indeed, face a dilemma at the time, having to confront both racial discrimination in the American film industry and misunderstandings from China itself. Therefore, it seemed a golden opportunity for her to subvert her own established image when the chance of playing the sympathetic peasant O-Lan in *The Good Earth* first came along. In essence, O-Lan was a significant female character in 1930s American cinema—she was invincible and powerful in adversity and also the spiritual leader of her family and the heroine of the film. As a Chinese heroine, O-Lan was neither sexualised to appeal to the male gaze, nor was she muted and pushed into the background. On the contrary, she was shown empowered to be able to make the most crucial decisions for her family when her husband collapses and has saved her family several times through her determination and devotion. Reviewer Mae Tinee wrote that:

O-Lan works like six horses, uncomplainingly. She bears her children alone, toiling in the field until her hour is at hand, and rising from her bed next day to again take her place by her husband's side ... Famine comes and ... the water buffalo must be killed for food. Wang cannot do it, O-Lan does ... O-Lan, O-Lan, O-Lan! O-Lan was the picture to me.⁹⁸

The film recognises O-Lan's importance to her family, and such recognition resonated with women's roles in their families in the United States society in the 1930s, when both rural and urban American women were taking extra responsibilities in their households as a

⁹⁷ Leong, *The China Mystique*, p. 75.

⁹⁸ Tinee, "'Good Earth' Film Triumph for Luise Rainer."

result of financial pressures caused by the Great Depression.⁹⁹ “During the 1930s,” according to Susan Ware,

strong consensus shaped women’s proper roles in society. This consensus, propagated by the media, religion, and other institutions of culture, guided men and women alike. Women had complete responsibility for the domestic sphere and played a crucial role in holding families together against the disintegrating forces of the Depression.¹⁰⁰

Eleanor Roosevelt wrote in *It’s Up to the Women* that “the women, the wives and mothers, are the inspiration of the homes, the persons for whom the men really work.”¹⁰¹ In the film industry, according to J. E. Smyth, though there was a decline in the number of female directors, the number of female employees remained robust in “writing, editing, acting, publicity, costume and makeup design, administration, research and producing.”¹⁰² These female workers acted as an important force in the industry. Many of them were either nominated or won Oscars in the 1930s.¹⁰³ Many successful films produced in this era also reflected this consensus, foregrounding empowered female characters in the narratives. For example, *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), both of which present female characters as the effective leaders of their families.¹⁰⁴ *The Good Earth*, in common with these films, suggested the invincibility of women. According to Schallert, *The Good*

⁹⁹ Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), pp. 8-14.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁰² J.E. Smyth, “Organisation Women and Belle Rebels: Hollywood’s Working Women in the 1930s,” Iwan Morgan and Philip John Davies, ed., *Hollywood and the Great Depression: American Film, Politics and Society in the 1930s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 68.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ John Ford, *Grapes of Wrath* (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1940); Victor Fleming, *Gone with the Wind* (Selznick International Pictures and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939).

Earth was “Searchingly human, a saga of womanhood, and the story of land and its sovereignty of power”. He believed that:

The woman’s story is greater than the actual conquest of the forces of nature. It is O-Lan who dominates the scene ... [the film] tells the story of all afflicted peoples, and of woman’s loyalty and her suffering because of that loyalty ... The faithfulness of O-Lan cannot be matched, or equalled, perhaps, but it symbolizes the great faithfulness of the mother woman, and hence, will reach the sentiments of the world.¹⁰⁵

It would have been a ground-breaking step forward in Hollywood history if an American-born but of Chinese descent actress such as Wong herself had been cast as O-Lan.

Unfortunately, however, Wong was only offered an audition for the unsympathetic minor role of Lotus—the sensual concubine who breaks up Wang Lung and O-Lan, and who only appears in the latter part of the film. In the casting notes of *The Good Earth*, according to Karen J. Leong, Lotus was “a very beautiful and sensuous girl of twenty. And let’s have her sensuous. Most stunning figure in the picture.”¹⁰⁶ Later in a film review in the *Daily Boston Globe*, Tilly Losch’s actual characterisation of Lotus was described as “attractive, although an exotic stranger to the simplicity of the other members of the cast.”¹⁰⁷

The role of Lotus was the only one that stood out as “exotic” in a film with a completely white cast of major characters—it offered yet another stereotypical oriental femme fatale character of the kind that Wong wanted to avoid. Lotus, remarks Leong, not only jeopardises the marriage of Wang Lung and O-Lan in the film, “but as an actor of Chinese descent, [Wong] also would threaten the racial unity of Muni and Rainer.”¹⁰⁸ Wong eventually turned

¹⁰⁵ Schallert, “‘Good Earth’ Triumphs at Carthay Premiere.”

¹⁰⁶ Leong, *The China Mystique*, 76.

¹⁰⁷ “Colonial Theatre ‘The Good Earth’”, *Daily Boston Globe* (9 March 1937).

¹⁰⁸ Leong, *The China Mystique*, 76.

down the role because it was “the only unsympathetic role in a picture featuring an all-American cast portraying Chinese characters,” a decision that reflected her more general protest against Hollywood’s discrimination against Asian actors and actresses.¹⁰⁹ However, there were also studio files that indicate the role was never actually offered to Wong as she was considered by the producers to be too old and not pretty enough to play the part of Lotus.¹¹⁰ The contradicting reports about the casting decision on Anna May Wong made the production of the film even more dramatic than it already was. The role of O-Lan was eventually given to Luise Rainer, a German-American actress, and her performance was celebrated by many as superb. Rainer claimed to distrust any “second-hand description” of the character but only her own imagination.¹¹¹ “I didn’t get O-Lan out of the book,” declared Rainer, “I got her in Chinatown.” She told the press that she had frequented Chinatowns and Chinese settlements in the West Coast to observe and “understand” Chinese women.¹¹² At the 10th Academy Awards in 1937, Rainer won the Best Actress for her role as O-Lan. Sadly and ironically, however, the only famous Chinese-American Hollywood star at the time had not even been considered eligible to audition for the part.¹¹³

After the discriminating casting for *The Good Earth*, Anna May Wong had a trip to China in 1936. During her stay in Shanghai, although welcomed by fans and a group of influential friends in Chinese artistic circles (including Mei Lan Fang, one of the most famous Beijing opera masters in history, and Hu Die, a Chinese movie star), she was nevertheless resented and continually criticised by “leftist hard-liners” and “Nationalist

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Hodges, *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman’s Daughter to Hollywood Legend*, p. 136.

¹¹¹ “Luise Rainer in ‘The Good Earth’”, *Daily Boston Globe* (14 March 1937).

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ *The Good Earth* received five nominations and won two awards: for Best Actress (won by Luise Rainer), for the Best Cinematography (won by Karl Freund), for Best Director (Sidney Franklin), for Film Editing (Basil Wrangell), and for Outstanding Production (MGM), retrieved from Oscars Awards database: <http://awardsdatabase.oscars.org/search/results>

conservatives.”¹¹⁴ According to Yunte Huang, Wong also faced hostility in Hong Kong with a crowd shouting “Down with Wong Liu Tsong [Anna May Wong]—the stooge that disgraces China. Don’t let her go ashore.” And her father, who remained for a time in his birthplace city of Canton, was warned by the district delegation not to allow Wong to visit, otherwise, “the entire [Wong] family might be expelled.”¹¹⁵ Such treatments of Wong contrasted with the warm reception Warner Oland received in China in the same year. As ironic as it was, despite the fact that Oland had played Fu Manchu several times and was the Chinese bandit in *Shanghai Express*, he enjoyed the support of the Chinese press and fans for the huge popularity of the Charlie Chan series in China.¹¹⁶

The Good Earth was a film that demonstrated the limitations of its time: for example, its various misrepresentations of Chinese people and culture, its yellow-face performances, and the discrimination against Chinese actors and actresses during the film’s production. However, once understood in its historical context, it was also a progressive film. It was the earliest film that presented the Chinese (with their family dynamics, emotions, and relationships) as ordinary human beings equal to their white counterparts. Many reviewers picked up this message and believed that *The Good Earth* was about people’s everyday struggles rather than a foreign and distant story. A critic in the *Daily Boston Globe* remarked:

... the story of Wang and O-Lan has a human appeal that will interest every husband and wife who sees the picture. Perhaps New England husbands and wives never fought a terrible winged army of locusts ... But they have worried about their babies, as do these Chinese peasants – they have seen their fortunes increase and decrease according to chance and not merit – they have battled side by side for their family ideals and have been hindered by mercenary and short-sighted relatives. In many respects the

¹¹⁴ Huang, *Charlie Chan: the Untold Story of the Honorable Detective and His Rendezvous with American History*, pp. 3998-4007 (Kindle version).

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4016 (Kindle version).

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 3921-40 (Kindle version).

story of Wang and O-Lan is the story of domestic life the world over. It merely happens that these characters are Chinese.¹¹⁷

The Hartford Courant called the film “a story of life as it has been lived by many people in many countries.”¹¹⁸ Reviewer Edwin Schallert also reasoned that the story borrowed “not only from experiences in China, but from the catastrophes that have stricken many other parts of the world.”¹¹⁹ Comments of this kind helped parallel Chinese life experiences to those of Americans. Here in the film, the Chinese were no longer the stereotypical aliens in exotic attires speaking Pidgin English (and in many cases, faceless and nameless), appearing in a picture only to make it more exciting for white movie-goers to watch. Instead, the Chinese in *The Good Earth* are ordinary people struggling to survive, just like many people the world over in the 1930s. From this perspective, *The Good Earth* was unusually progressive in terms of Hollywood’s history in its representation of Chinese people.

The film was a unique episode in terms of the level of diplomatic conversation it involved during the production and the new perspective it brought to treating Chinese people on screen. However, *The Good Earth* did not subvert Hollywood’s overall tradition of presenting China and Chinese people in certain ways—the stereotype of a bizarre and fanciful China continued to dominate Hollywood’s representations of the country. Capra’s utopian Shangri-La in *Lost Horizon* (discussed above) provided a fantasy of the Far East as a celestial and idyllic escapist destination in 1937, while Josef von Sternberg’s *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941), the director’s second film centring on the city Shanghai nine years after the release of the popular *Shanghai Express*, accentuated the supposed otherworldliness,

¹¹⁷ “Colonial Theatre ‘The Good Earth’”, *Daily Boston Globe*.

¹¹⁸ “‘Good Earth’ is Powerful Film Drama: Paul Muni and Luise Rainer Starred in Great Picture Opening Thursday at Bushnell,” *The Hartford Courant* (4 April 1937).

¹¹⁹ Schallert, “‘Good Earth’ Triumphs at Carthay Premiere.”

uncanniness, hedonism and lawlessness of the city of Shanghai specifically and Chinese people in general.

The Shanghai Gesture (1941) and Hollywood's fixation with Shanghai

The Shanghai Gesture, released in 1941, was Josef von Sternberg's film adaption of a Broadway theatrical production with the same title written by John Colton in 1926. The play tells the story of Mother Goddam's ruthless revenge on her ex-husband, Englishman Sir Guy Charteris, for selling her into prostitution and returning to England to marry a proper English lady after his business in China is over. On the day when the new Mrs. Charteris dies giving birth to a daughter, Mother Goddam appears on Sir Guy's doorstep and secretly switches his white daughter with her own Eurasian daughter, who had been fathered by Sir Guy. Twenty years later, Mother Goddam has become the owner of an infamous brothel in Shanghai, and she plots her ultimate revenge on Sir Guy when he visits the city. She hosts a banquet on the Chinese New Year and invites all the white elites in the city to attend, including Sir Guy. During the banquet, she runs an auction of a white virgin, who later is revealed to be Charteris's daughter, stolen by Mother Goddam twenty years earlier. Soon, however, Mother Goddam is told that her own flesh and blood Poppy, raised by Sir Guy, has turned into a drug-addicted nymphomaniac, described in the play as "like leprosy—like some foul disease—some unclean animal."¹²⁰ Shocked by this reality, Mother Goddam kills Poppy, the story of East-West miscegenation being ended by a tragical filicide.

From 1931 to 1940, thirty-one different versions of the original story had circulated amongst Hollywood studios, but all of them went into the waste bin mainly because of the story's bold depictions of female sexuality and the presentation of miscegenation—the "frank

¹²⁰ Kuo, "*The Shanghai Gesture: Melodrama and Modern Women in the East/West Romance*," p. 101.

and highly colored exposition of fabulous sin” as *The Baltimore Sun* called it.¹²¹ Although miscegenation in the Production Code had been specifically defined as “sexual relationship between the white and black races,” the PCA actually had interpreted it more widely to include whites and other races.¹²² In 1940, however, producer Arnold Pressburger assembled a group of scriptwriters, including director von Sternberg, to rewrite the story, and this led to the final film adaption in 1941.

Many aspects of the story, both major and minor, had been changed or compromised to conform to the Code. The name of Mother Goddam was changed to Mother Gin Sling, for example, not only because the original was considered a vulgar expression and religiously inappropriate, but the name also contains a sexually suggestive subtext, alluded in the narrative. In the play, Mother Goddam explains her name as having originated from a classic sexual joke – that white sailors taught Chinese prostitutes that “god damn” means “I love you,” therefore, when the sailors cry “god damn” during lovemaking, the prostitutes will understand it as an expression of love. The name of Mother Goddam, for this reason, represents a raw embodiment of white men’s sexual exploitation of Chinese women as well as a revelation of a sexual-economic exchange relationship between the two races.¹²³ In the film, however, Mother Goddam becomes Mother Gin Sling—the sexually suggestive and morally-challenging ideas behind the original name have consequently been played down. Mother Gin Sling’s business is also changed from an infamous brothel (Scarlet House) to a renowned casino in Shanghai. Although the two careers of brothel and casino manager are equally illegal, marginalised, and at the same time lucrative, the sensual and hypersexual characteristics of the female protagonist are consequently reduced by the change.

¹²¹ “The Shanghai Gesture,” *The Baltimore Sun* (5 March 1942).

¹²² “The Production Code” in Doherty’s *Pre-Code Hollywood*, Appendix 2, p. 361.

¹²³ Kuo, “*The Shanghai Gesture: Melodrama and Modern Women in the East/West Romance*,” pp. 101-102.



(Figure 4.4: Mother Gin Sling in the film adaption)

The life trajectory of Mother Gin Sling (played by Ona Munson) in the film is also significantly altered from Mother Goddam's. In the stage play, the female protagonist is an extremely vengeful woman, who retaliates at any expense. She concocts her plan for vengeance soon after she has been abandoned by Sir Guy, and she waits twenty years for the perfect timing in order finally to execute her revenge. Mother Gin Sling, on the other hand, though superficially being presented as a "Dragon Lady," is much more victimised than empowered. In the film, Poppy (Gene Tierney) is the only daughter Sir Guy (Walter Huston) has, and Mother Gin Sling the only wife he married but later cruelly abandoned after stealing her inheritance. Being the birth-mother of Poppy, Mother Gin Sling is (strangely) unaware of the fact that her daughter is alive and has been taken away to England by her ex-husband. Therefore, Mother Gin Sling never has a plan to take revenge on him until twenty years after her abandonment, when she accidentally learns of Sir Guy's presence in Shanghai with his daughter.

The auction scene in the film, originally a carefully-plotted humiliation for Sir Guy in the play, becomes a staged amusement for Mother Gin Sling's guests at the New Year banquet when a group of white and Asian girls are shown in cages hanging outside the window. During the film's production, Chinese consul T. K. Chang had written several times to producer Arnold Pressburger suggesting various deletions from the film. The need to eliminate the auction scene was particularly emphasised by Chang, as he believed any presentation of slavery would seem particularly problematic to an American audience. Chang did not want Americans to be prejudiced against the Chinese, especially at a time when the Republic of China was in desperate need for American public sympathy during the continuing war against Japan, which had been going on for 10 years by 1941. Chang complained in one of his letters:

About the auction of Chinese girls, there exists no such system in China. Such a portrayal may tend to mislead public understanding of our social-democracy, when the democratic worlds—particularly this country [the US]—is so decisively set against enslavement.¹²⁴

In spite of Chang's protest, the film producers decided to preserve the sequence in the final film. They did, however, make some changes to it – Mother Gin Sling assures her guests several times in the sequence that the auction is a complete set-up put on solely to impress tourists. Nevertheless, she points out that such system did exist a long time ago, when she herself had been sold by her husband, revealing the story of Sir Guy's disposing of her after stealing her inheritance. The banquet sequence, therefore, transforms from being a vehicle for a woman's revenge into an outcry over her victimisation. Such changes significantly weaken

¹²⁴ T. K. Chang to Arnold Pressburger, 21 August 1941, *The Shanghai Gesture* file, PCA files, p. 2.

the empowerment of the female protagonist in the original play. Although the storyline of the film still “debunks the myths of white masculine integrity, Western civility, and morality” – this was done in a much less powerful way in the final movie.¹²⁵

Despite the many changes made in the film, director von Sternberg kept the disturbing plot of a mother murdering her own child to bring out the chaotic and extraordinary characteristics of his conception of Shanghai while simultaneously expressing condemnation of miscegenation involving East and West.¹²⁶ It is important to note that the daughter of Mother Gin Sling and Sir Guy is nicknamed “Poppy”—the flower which, in reality, brought the Qing empire and Britain into their original exploitative relationship. Poppy in the film is a spoiled rich girl who is tricked into alcoholism and a gambling problem by her own mother. Although Poppy is not depicted as depraved as she was in the play, she is no angel either. Mother Gin Sling criticises Poppy to Sir Guy: “Her soul is hollow, her emotions are cheap, she has no more control than her father had, she had no more honour than he had, her blood is no good.” Sir Guy replies: “Her [Poppy’s] blood isn’t bad unless yours is bad; her emotions aren’t cheap [but] unless your emotions are cheap. She’s not my daughter, she’s our daughter.”

Their conversation recalls the traditional prejudice towards miscegenation and the assumption that an interracial person is somehow innately degraded by birth. Another bi-racial character in the film, “Doctor” Omar (Victor Mature)—described by *The Sun* as “a mongrel gigolo who dresses in modernized Arabian style”—is also unfavourably presented as the person who helps Mother Gin Sling to trick Poppy into alcoholism and gambling.¹²⁷ Through presentations of the two bi-racial characters, von Sternberg expressed his own

¹²⁵ Kuo, “*The Shanghai Gesture*: Melodrama and Modern Women in the East/West Romance,” p. 96.

¹²⁶ Schallert, “Director to Film Own ‘Shanghai Gesture’”.

¹²⁷ “The Shanghai Gesture,” *The Baltimore Sun*, p. 10.

disapproval of miscegenation. The same racial view can also be found in his original *Shanghai Express* from 1932, in which the villain (a cruel bandit played by Warner Oland) had also been shown as a Eurasian person.

The climax of the film is close to the end: Mother Gin Sling kills Poppy with a pistol even though she has acknowledged their mother-daughter relationship. It was not the first time that Hollywood had shown Chinese people committing filicide. By 1930s, several commercially successful films – such as in *The Forbidden City* (1918) and *Mr. Wu* (1927) – had included Chinese parents murdering their own flesh and blood. These films used the death of a bi-racial child or a Chinese woman who is pregnant with a white man's child as a symbolic form of punishment for interracial relationships. In *The Shanghai Gesture*, however, the murder is carried out by the victimised woman herself (rather than a father figure who later avenges her disgrace). If Sir Guy is an epitome of western imperialism and Mother Gin Sling the oppressed/exploited, the termination of Poppy by her mother can be interpreted as a revolt on the part of the East against the West through, partially, self-destruction. This message was particularly relevant in the film considering the fanciful locale in which it was set—the International Settlement in Shanghai—a “hybrid” place born on Chinese territory as a result of British and American imperialism in China.

Von Sternberg had a fixation on the city Shanghai – so much so that after some unproductive years in his career, he would use *The Shanghai Gesture* (a picture with a title echoing his successful masterpiece *Shanghai Express* from nine years earlier) as his means of mounting a big comeback in the film industry. Only this time, von Sternberg claimed he had been able to represent Shanghai even better than before as he had now experienced the real China during his visit to the East:

The intermission in my career gave me the chance to spend two years travelling and in the course of this long journey I visited many places that I had wanted to see in the

past, especially in the Orient. My visit to Shanghai gave me a special viewpoint on “The Shanghai Gesture.” I have already incorporated into that production various incidents and characters that I observed in that unique melting pot ... More than a story of individuals, we are making this “Shanghai Gesture” a narrative of the strange metropolis itself. Its International Settlement is doomed because of those strange wickednesses that prevail and that have caused it to be referred to as Shanghai and Gomorrah, a modern interpretation of the biblical words.¹²⁸

According to reviewer Philip K. Scheuer, von Sternberg’s efforts to make Shanghai exotic and dangerous in *The Shanghai Gesture* were so ostentatious that they even reminded him of the nickelodeon melodramas with lurid attributes blazoned up front, which for this film, he suggested, would perhaps read “See the Chinese Underworld—Beautiful Slave Girl Sold at Auction—Mother Gin Sling, Queen of Evil-doers—Her Helpless Victims Gambled on the Turn of a Wheel.”¹²⁹ The film opened at Grauman’s Chinese Theatre in Los Angeles, the “Chinese” decorations of which would further provide Los Angeles movie-goers’ with an immersive/illusory experience of Shanghai as a fanciful foreign city.¹³⁰ Indeed, according to *The Baltimore Sun*, although the film-makers’ creativity was limited by having to avoid offending the Chinese – having “to mind their p’s and queues, watch their innuendoes, beware of double meanings, keep in mind the censorship rules of half a dozen States, and observe the rules of international diplomacy” – they somehow had also managed to succeed in reproducing “the atmosphere of evil.”¹³¹ The paper remarked:

¹²⁸ Edwin Schallert, “Director to Film Own ‘Shanghai Gesture’”, *Los Angeles Times* (19 August 1941).

¹²⁹ Philip K. Scheuer, “‘Shanghai Gesture’ Bids for Laurels as shocker,” *Los Angeles Times* (30 January 1942).

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ “The Shanghai Gesture,” *The Baltimore Sun*, p. 10.

A semblance of order is maintained, and there is very little that could be singled out for censoring, but only a naive, unworldly spectator could fail to sense the fact that malevolent influences are at work throughout this bizarre story.¹³²

Shanghai was, in many ways, a mysterious and sensual destination to Americans. Though von Sternberg acknowledged himself in his autobiography that his trip to Shanghai—the real China which he saw—was nothing fanciful, he continued depicting the country in certain ways in his picture because that was the “proper” and “authentic” China Americans wanted to see—a deeply-rooted western fantasy of the eastern world.¹³³

This fixation with Shanghai as a fantasy city is observable in other Hollywood productions of the time. From 1930 to 1941, many Hollywood films were set in Shanghai or used the city as an exhilarating element to spice up the stories, including: *The Ship from Shanghai* (1930), *Shanghai Express* (1932), *Shanghai Madness* (1933), *Daughter of Shanghai* (1937), *West of Shanghai* (1937), *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941), and many more. According to Ying Xiao, there were almost thirty Hollywood films, produced in the 1930s and 1940s, with titles containing the word “Shanghai.” These films’ titles connect the city closely to “the attributes of ship, boat, express, madness, daughter, exile, lady, cobra, gesture,” which turn Shanghai into a “liminal space saturated with darkness, danger and disorder and an underworld infiltrated by the kind of mobility, hypersexuality and a towering sense of alienation and otherness.”¹³⁴ During this period, Shanghai was often referred to as the “Paris of the East” or “Whore of the Orient” because of a cosmopolitanism that resulted from its complicated colonial circumstances. As early as 1843, the first British settlement in Shanghai opened under the Treaty of Nanking, signed between the British Empire and the

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Josef von Sternberg, *Fun in a Chinese Laundry*, pp. 263-264.

¹³⁴ Ying Xiao, “‘Lust, Caution’!?: Shanghai and the transnational and transgressive imaginations in classical Hollywood cinema,” *Asian Cinema*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2017), p. 141.

Qing Empire after the First Opium War (1840-42). France and the United States joined the UK as Treaty Powers later in 1844, all of them determined to secure concessions in Shanghai for both mercantile and religious purposes. In 1863, the British and American settlements merged and became the famous International Settlement (a location as noted above that had been visited by von Sternberg before he represented it in *The Shanghai Gesture*). This extra-territorial entity was predominantly controlled by the UK, and the British dominance was only challenged many years later by another aggressor, Japan, in the 1930s. The International Settlement in Shanghai finally came to an end after World War II, more than a century after its foundation.¹³⁵

As an international ports and conduits for modernity, Shanghai and British colonial Hong Kong were extraordinary cities that functioned very differently from other parts of China – they appealed to Americans as gateways to the “China Market” with its fabled four hundred million customers which had been dreamed of for decades. When von Sternberg visited Shanghai in the early 1930s, the International Settlement was still in its prime. According to Robert Nield’s description of the real environment of the International Settlement from the 1910s to the early 1930s (perhaps its “golden age”), it was an extremely diverse, prosperous and busy international metropolis:

Racing was one activity that was open to all. During the twice-yearly season all banks and businesses closed at 11:00 a.m. to enable everybody to participate. Other forms of entertainment abounded, with Foochow (Fuzhou) Road being the centre for tea-houses, “sing-song” houses, opium dens, restaurants, brothels and theatres. Nearby Nanking Road was (and is) the premier shopping district. Spurred on by the vibrant Chinese film industry, local people adopted Western dress and habits. The opening of new Chinese department stores, such as Sincere (1917) and Wing On (1918),

¹³⁵ Robert Nield, *“Shanghai”: The Foreign Presence in China in the Treaty Port Era, 1840-1943* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015).

transformed shopping into entertainment. When the foreign elite indicated that they did not wish to be served by Chinese, the major stores recruited European sales assistants—and advertised the fact. The population had doubled to a million between 1895 and 1910, and then tripled again by 1930. By then there were over 70,000 foreigners. Jewish and White Russian immigrants were new and significant communities, fleeing persecution in Europe ... Land prices tripled in five years in the early 1930s, making Shanghai's land the most expensive in the world.¹³⁶

Von Sternberg's 1941 film, though it mainly depicts the indoor environment and activities within the gambling house, does capture some of the cosmopolitanism of the real International Settlement—people from different parts of the world (England, America, Germany, China, India) are all shown gathering in the city to spend money, which in reality brought huge economic prosperity to Shanghai. However, a film of this kind, which was based on a morally questionable story set in a location that was considered China's national humiliation, deeply disturbed Chinese officials.



¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 207.

(Figure 4.5: Mother Gin Sling's Gambling House in the film)



(Figure 4.6: Mother Gin Sling's guests at the Chinese New Year Banquet served by Chinese young girls)

After a conference with von Sternberg in August 1941, Chinese Consul Chang provided a four-page long list of suggestions for the film to its producer, Arnold Pressburger. The list laid out the scenes that the Chinese government wanted the studio to eliminate: for example, the misrepresentation of a Chinese soldier, the presentation of the auction of girls and the filicide sequence, as well as some minor changes that the Chinese hoped would also be made.¹³⁷ Chang stressed in his letter that the script exhibited the “underworld activities of the Chinese people alone and neglect[s] the beautiful part of [their] virtue,” which was considered particularly inappropriate since China and the United States by this time were cementing their friendship for a “common cause,” opposition to the Axis powers.¹³⁸ As a response, Pressburger invited Chang to visit the sets and was confident that they, “along with [their] costumes and Chinese actors,” fully portray “the finest aspects of Chinese dignity and

¹³⁷ T. K. Chang to Arnold Pressburger, 21 August 1941, *The Shanghai Gesture* file, PCA files.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

art,” regardless of the fact that the story was essentially about a Chinese gambling house-owner’s vengeance and filicide that take place in the International Settlement.¹³⁹ Pressburger assured Chang:

Please do not forget that our film “Shanghai Gesture” is not meant to portray reality, but to display a world of fantasy. This imaginary world has no connection with the realistic aspects of today.¹⁴⁰

Chang replied to Pressburger arguing that imaginations were always constructed from the raw material of realities, especially when *The Shanghai Gesture* was explicitly “descriptive of certain definite people in a definite place.”¹⁴¹ But the producer insisted that a film was *supposed* to be fanciful:

... you must understand that the film “Shanghai Gesture” is merely fiction and not a newsreel or an educational film on China. As I have already told you the picture will mainly serve as entertainment like most of the films shown.¹⁴²

The worried Chinese consul subsequently turned to the PCA for help, but Geoffrey Shurlock, who was briefly in charge when Breen was at RKO, sided with the studio. He asserted that the film should not be thought to reflect upon China in any way because it was set in “the No-Man’s Land of the international settlement at Shanghai” and the filicide ought not to offend the Chinese since Poppy was presented as a Eurasian, and therefore her relationship with Mother Gin Sling did not represent a “normal Chinese family

¹³⁹ Pressburger to Chang, 22 August 1941, *The Shanghai Gesture* file, PCA files.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Chang to Pressburger, 25 August 1941, *The Shanghai Gesture* file, PCA files.

¹⁴² Arnold Pressburger to S. C. Hsu, 25 September 1941, *The Shanghai Gesture* file, PCA files.

relationship.”¹⁴³ The final result of Chang’s persistent negotiations with both the studio and the PCA was a near-complete failure: all three major objections he raised—the problematic portrayal of China, the Chinese mother killing her own daughter sequence, and the scene about an auction of women—were preserved in the final film. According to Hye Seung Chung, both Shurlock and Pressburger’s replies to the Chinese consul reeked of “impatience and cultural entitlement” – and the real problem behind their attitudes, she continued, was that “‘we-know-better-than-you’ approach to cultural representations (which might also be termed ‘we-have-the-right-to-represent-you-the-way-we-see-fit’ defense).”¹⁴⁴

By 1941, despite Chinese consul T. K. Chang’s active involvement (at least from his perspective) in Hollywood, the PCA as well as the studios did not really take on board his views on the representations of China and Chinese people in American film. The Chinese Nationalist Government sometimes used diplomatic pressure to try to persuade Hollywood to listen to its objections. For example, it banned studios that had produced films that misrepresented Chinese characters (as happened, for example, to Paramount both for *Shanghai Express* and *The General Died at Dawn*) and allied with other governments to bring joint pressure on Hollywood against derogatory representations of foreign nationals (for example, with Italy and Germany, and as exemplified by the incident revolving *The Cat’s Paw*). However, Hollywood studios always managed to find some way to assuage Chinese anger while making minimum changes to their original scripts and complete films. From *Shanghai Express* (1932) to *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941), many films about China and Chinese people had been made, but few progressive representations of Chinese people were

¹⁴³ Chang to Geoffrey Shurlock, 23 September 1941, *The Shanghai Gesture* file, PCA files; Memorandum Re: The Shanghai Gesture (Arnold Prods.), 26 September 1941, *The Shanghai Gesture* file, PCA files.

¹⁴⁴ Chung, *Hollywood Diplomacy*, p. 1367 (Kindle version).

created—O-Lan in *The Good Earth* was a positive portrayal, but the all-white casts and the yellow-face make-up of this and other films reflected the deep-rooted racial prejudice in the industry.

The overall image of China by the end of 1930s, indeed, had not evolved much from that represented by von Sternberg's anarchic, uncanny, and sensual Shanghai in *Shanghai Express* in 1932 despite the Chinese government's decade-long efforts to "uplift" the image of China in American cinema. Hye Seung Chung argued in her recent book *Hollywood Diplomacy* that the Chinese consuls only lost their negotiating power with Hollywood studios and the PCA after the dissolution of the CMPCC in 1938 and were further silenced because of China's financial dependence on the United States after it entered World War II. She believed that "without the national film censorship board's backend bargaining power to put a temporary moratorium in the exhibition of offending company's entire output in the Chinese market," Consul Chang's protests against offensive characterisations of Chinese people had become insignificant to, and easily ignored by, Hollywood producers.¹⁴⁵

However, when we take into consideration the great number of American films about China produced in the 1930s and analyse their PCA files, it becomes obvious that the actual *image* of China had changed very little throughout the decade with or without the existence of the Chinese censor boards (the NBFC and CMPCC). Hollywood studios always had their ways to preserve the sequences they wanted to preserve. Even with a film like *The Good Earth*, the production of which involved prolonged diplomatic co-operation, MGM managed to circumvent the Chinese government and the Chinese press's requirements in the final production. It is argued here that the NBFC and CMPCC, as well as the Chinese consuls in LA, had minimal influences on the cultural constructions of China and Chinese people in American motion pictures. An overall fanciful image of China had been fixed in many

¹⁴⁵ Chung, *Hollywood Diplomacy*, pp. 1260-1385 (Kindle version).

American film-makers' minds throughout the Depression era. It would only be challenged after December 1941, as the US-China political relationship became much closer as a consequence of Japan's sudden attack on Pearl Harbour.

Chapter Five: The Second World War and a “New” China on Screen

The Second World War saw tremendous changes in how China and the Chinese people were represented in Hollywood films. In part, these drastic changes were caused by Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor and the fact that China itself subsequently became an ally of the United States in the Pacific region. As the war progressed, more and more American politicians and propagandists advocated a pro-China agenda in mainstream media. The Office of War Information (OWI), an American wartime propaganda agency, made particular contributions to the “positive” images of China and the Chinese people constructed in American wartime films – images that superficially broke, at least in the short term, with earlier stereotypes of the Chinese in Hollywood movies but were nevertheless underpinned by racial prejudices toward the Chinese and destined largely to disappear after 1949.

US Foreign Policy from the Early 1930s to 1941

On 18 September 1931, a Japanese soldier blew up a small amount of explosive close to a Japanese-owned railway near Mukden (now Shenyang) in north-eastern China. This act (which would come to be known as the Mukden Incident) was planned by Japanese nationalists as a means of providing Japan with an excuse to invade Manchuria. By February 1932, China’s three north-eastern provinces were all occupied by Japanese troops and their name had been changed to one that would echo round the world: Manchukuo (a term originating from Japanese, meaning the states of Manchuria). Japan’s aggression against China consequently started long before the beginning of World War II or the United States’ participation in the war.

Most American newspapers covered what was happening in China to some degree and the American public was informed, more or less, about Japan’s invasion and the long-term

sufferings of the Chinese people. For instance, in 1931, only days after Japan's invasion, *The Christian Science Monitor* published an article reporting the efforts of the League of Nations to persuade Japan to withdraw its troops from Manchuria.¹ In September 1932, *The New York Times* reported the heightening Sino-Japanese tension in China:

... Chinese authorities at Shanghai are protesting continuance of manoeuvres by Japanese landing forces, declaring that Japanese aggressiveness is inviting trouble. Peiping [today's Beijing] is also nervous because anti-Japanese students are becoming uncontrollable as Sept. 18, the anniversary of the start of the present Japanese campaign in Manchuria, approaches.²

Since the beginning of the Sino-Japanese war, United States foreign policy increasingly favoured China over Japan because of America's own political and economic interests in Asia. In January 1932, months after the Mukden Incident, the Hoover administration announced the Stimson Doctrine in response.³ The doctrine condemned Japan's atrocities in China, refused to recognise the Chinese territory occupied by Japan, and reaffirmed America's traditional "Open Door" Policy for trade with China—a policy ostensibly aiming at protecting China's sovereignty which, in reality, was a reassertion of the US's trade privileges in China along with those of other foreign powers.⁴ Although the statement demonstrated a general sympathy toward China, the fact that it did not propose any practical measures or sanctions toward Japan made it ineffective as a means of limiting Japanese

¹ Erwin D. Canham (Staff Correspondent by Cable from Monitor Bureau), "Japan acts to evacuate Manchuria: Orders Withdrawal of Troops in Accedence to Plea of League, Geneva Regards Decision of Upmost Importance in Furthering Peace of World," *The Christian Science Monitor* (25 September 1931).

² Hallett Abend, "All China Tense; Japan Fears Clash: Tokyo looks for agitation to become intolerable When It Recognizes Manchukuo," *The New York Times* (8 September 1932).

³ "The Mukden Incident of 1931 and the Stimson Doctrine," Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs (retrieved 11 September 2017).

⁴ "Secretary of State John Hay and the Open Door in China, 1899–1900," Office of the Historian (retrieved 16 October 2017).

aggression. When President Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in March 1933, he inherited the Stimson Doctrine and did not in the short term take further steps against the Tokyo government in order to avoid a potentially dangerous confrontation with Japan.⁵

After years of following Japan's brutalities in news reports written by American correspondents in China, however, a number of influential Americans, including actor and social commentator Will Rogers and authors Pearl S. Buck, Edgar Snow, and Carl Crow, sought to raise public awareness of the terrible situation in China.⁶ There were increasing calls from liberal and left-wing internationalists for economic sanctions against Japan, which had joined Nazi Germany in an Anti-Comintern Pact in 1936. In August 1937, Japan invaded Shanghai and killed many Chinese citizens. Four months later, Japanese troops occupied Nanjing, the capital city of China's Nationalist government led by Chiang Kai-Shek, who subsequently retreated to Chongqing. In 1937-1938, the atrocities committed by the Japanese in the two cities were well-publicised in the American press. Many American journalists sent back reports of the shocking scenes they had witnessed. For example, C. Yates McDaniel published extracts from his diary (written in Shanghai) in the *Seattle Daily Times* on 17 December 1937:

December 12—Nanking without water, heat, lights. Bombardment this afternoon terrific, even Purple Mountain's 1,400-foot heights sprayed by shrapnel ...

December 16—before departing for Shanghai, Japanese consul brought "no entry" notices, which posted on embassy property ... My last remembrance of Nanking: Dead Chinese, Dead Chinese, Dead Chinese.⁷

Correspondent F. Tillman Durdin also reported back what he saw in the *New York Times* on

⁵ Chang, *Fateful Ties*, 143.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 144-55.

⁷ C. Yates McDaniel, "Newsman's Diary Describes Horrors in Nanking," *Seattle Daily Times* (17 December 1937).

18 December 1937:

Wholesale looting, the violation of women, the murder of civilians, the eviction of Chinese from their homes, mass executions of war prisoners and the impressing of able-bodied men turned Nanking into a city of terror.⁸

Besides these journalists, missionaries also played an important part in reporting back what had happened and protecting the Chinese refugees in Nanjing and Shanghai. For example, the diaries and correspondence of Minnie Vautrin, a missionary in China, were preserved and later published to reveal the Japanese's shocking crimes committed during the notorious "Rape of Nanjing"—during which Japanese soldiers raped, tortured, and killed tens of thousands of Chinese women, men, and children in Nanjing between 1937 and 1938.⁹

By the end of the massacre in Nanjing, it has been estimated that approximately 260,000 to 350,000 Chinese had been butchered by Japanese soldiers.¹⁰ In the meantime, an American gunboat – the USS *Panay* – had been sunk by the Japanese in the Yangtze River (near Nanjing) in December 1937. Pictures and news reports on the attack flooded the American press with a newsreel coverage of the bombing taken from the deck of the *Panay* also available for the public to watch at some movie-theatres.¹¹ In a newspaper interview, a survivor of the *Panay* bombing called his escape a miracle since the Japanese did not sink the ship accidentally but repeated their air attacks. The survivor declared that:

⁸ F. Tillman Durdin, "Butchery Marked Capture of Nanking," *The New York Times* (18 December 1937).

⁹ For Minnie Vautrin's diaries and correspondence, see *Terror in Minnie Vautrin's Nanjing: Diaries and Correspondence, 1937-38*, edited and with an introduction by Suping Lu (Champaign, IL.: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Iris Chang, "Exposing The Rape of Nanking," *Newsweek* (1 December 1997).

¹¹ "'Panay' Bombing Shown on Screen by Theatres Here: Palace, Loew's [sic] Poli Films Also Reveal Activity Before, After Attack'", *The Hartford Courant* (31 December 1937).

Along with about 100 Chinese and other foreigners, I got ashore. Japanese troops lined up on the shore immediately questioned us and told us to return aboard ship. The planes then returned and dropped more bombs and we again dashed ashore, fleeing along railroad tracks toward Wuhu.¹²

In a news report published two days after the sinking of the *Panay*, Connecticut journalist H. C. Bailey accused Japan of an intentional attempt to provoke western nations in China:

In supplanting the Western control over China with their own, Japan is now apparently conducting an undeclared war not alone upon the Chinese but upon the West as well. Not only the Chinese bow to the will of the Japanese conqueror, but the western powers must recognize that their day in China is over and withdraw or fight to maintain their imperial state there.¹³

Although President Roosevelt did not take any aggressive action in response to the *Panay* bombing, the attitudes of both government officials and the American public toward the Sino-Japanese war changed drastically after late 1937. Sympathy towards China increased further, and a growing number of Americans, though not supporting military intervention in the Far East, began to favour trade sanctions against Japan. The Roosevelt administration also began to come around to the idea that an effective fighting China could act as a buffer zone to impede, or at least delay, Japan's imperialist schemes for its "Greater East-Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere." According to Michael Schaller, "the view of China as a vast punching bag on which the Japanese would wear themselves out had a certain brutal, but understandable, appeal to the United States."¹⁴ In addition, Secretary of Treasury Henry Morgenthau and State

¹² F. Hayden Vines, "Survivor of Yangtze Outrage Describes Escape as Miracle: repeated attacks by plane on U.S.S. *Panay* Recounted by Refugee," *The Washington Post* (17 December 1937).

¹³ H. C. Bailey, "The People's Forum, Far East Issue: Japan Seems to be Provoking All Other Nations," *The Hartford Courant* (14 December 1937).

¹⁴ Schaller, *The United States and China into the Twenty-First Century*, p. 52.

Department China expert Stanley Hornbeck pointed out that Soviet Union leader Joseph Stalin was ready to aid China as he, too, was afraid of Japan's expansion in Asia. Consequently, if the US was reluctant to help China, this would undoubtedly strengthen the relationship between China and the Soviet Union.¹⁵

Ultimately, in the fall of 1938, President Roosevelt at last publicly condemned Japan's militarism and signed a \$25 million loan to Chiang's government – the first American financial support for China since Japan's invasion. According to Schaller, this aid was not huge in size, yet it was a big gesture in terms of its symbolic value.¹⁶ After this first loan, the US began to send millions of dollars of economic, medical, and military aid to China. This was organised through both official channels (through the Universal Trading Corporation, and later China Defense Supplies—an agency chaired by T. V. Soong, brother-in-law of Chiang Kai-shek) and non-governmental organisations (e.g. the United China Relief [UCR]).¹⁷ Meanwhile, Washington also began to impose selective embargoes on Japan. In September 1938, the US government suspended the export of scrap iron to Japan; in July 1939, the 1911 Treaty of Commerce and Navigation between the US and Japan was terminated.¹⁸ Two years later, in July 1941, Washington froze all Japanese assets in the US and cut off the flow of American petroleum, a strategic import that was crucial to Japan, especially during its war with China.¹⁹ Washington, Schaller argues, held off from announcing a complete embargo on the export of petroleum for an exceptionally long period in order to avoid provoking Japan before the US was more fully prepared for a war.²⁰

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 49-54.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 54.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁸ Chang, *Fateful Ties*, p. 161; W. H. M., "Economic Warfare with Japan or a New Treaty?", *Foreign Affairs* (January 1940).

¹⁹ Ibid., 162.

²⁰ Schaller, *The United States and China*, p.55.

In the summer of 1940, retired army pilot Claire L. Chennault and T. V. Soong, the chair of China Defense Supplies, began to promote the idea of a secret Chinese-American air force to attack Japan. Supporters of the plan believed it could be an effective military deployment with minimal cost and risk if carried out successfully. Since China lacked trained army aviators, American pilots, later better-known as the “Flying Tigers” (shown in many American wartime films), were assigned to the mission as an American Volunteer Group (AVG) under Lend-Lease to China.²¹ The secret air war was approved by the president in July 1941, synchronised with the cut-off of petroleum exports. On 26 November 1941, the United States delivered an ultimatum to Japan and, in clauses 3 and 4, demanded Japan withdraw its military forces “from China and from Indochina” while insisting that “The Government of the United States and the Government of Japan will not support – militarily, politically, economically – any government or regime in China other than the National Government of the Republic of China with capital temporarily at Chungking.”²² Japan rejected the note and a few days later, on 7 December 1941, before the “Flying Tigers” and their bombers could arrive in China, attacked the American naval base at Pearl Harbor. President Roosevelt gave his famous “Day of Infamy” speech on 8 December 1941 in response to this assault. Later the same day, Congress approved a formal declaration of war against Japan.²³ The entry of the United States into the war would further strengthen American political and military connections with Chiang Kai-Shek’s Nationalist Government in China.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 61-63.

²² “United States Note to Japan November 26, 1941,” *Dept. of State Bulletin*, Vol. V, 129 (13 December 1941). (Retrieved from Yale Law School, the Avalon Project on 11 September 2017).

²³ “FDR’s ‘Day of Infamy’ Speech: Crafting a Call to Arms,” *Prologue*, National Archives (Winter 2001).

United China Relief

Between 1937 and 1939, according to Gallup polls, the proportion of Americans sympathising with China's plight rose from 43 percent to 74 percent.²⁴ Humanitarian agencies with different concerns started to raise monies for war-related medical aid and reconstruction in China. In 1941, eight major agencies consolidated their operations under the United China Relief, which was much influenced by magazine magnet Henry Luce, a missionary child who had been born in China and who personally admired Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek – even more so after Chiang's conversion to Christianity when he married Soong Mei-ling (hereafter Madame Chiang). Luce believed that the Chiangs and the Chinese Nationalist government (the Kuomintang [KMT] party) were China's only hope ever to become “modernised”—which he believed meant becoming Christian and capitalist like the United States. Luce, therefore, made *Time* and *Life* magazines “virtual Kuomintang party publications.”²⁵ Luce not only ensured that Chiang would appear 8 times on the front cover of *Time* between 1931 and 1949, he also used both magazines to bring pressure to bear on the Roosevelt administration (by publishing a series of articles warning the public about possible consequences if the US “lost” China) in order to bargain for more aid for the Nationalist government.²⁶

²⁴ T. Christopher Jespersen, *American Images of China, 1931-1949* (California: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 46. See: Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935-1971*, 1:69.

²⁵ Schaller, *The United States and China*, p. 113.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 113-14.



(Figure 5.1: Chiang in 4 April 1927 issue)²⁷(Figure 5.2: The Chiangs in 26 October 1931 issue)²⁸



²⁷ Chiang on *Time* cover in 1927, retrieved from *Time* magazine covers archive: <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19270404,00.html>

²⁸ Chiangs on *Time* cover in 1931, retrieved from *Time* magazine covers archive: <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19311026,00.html>

(Figure 5.3: Chiang in 9 November 1936 issue)²⁹(Figure 5.4: the Chiangs in 3 January 1938 issue)³⁰

Luce invited many notable names from various fields to join the board of the UCR: these included famous author Pearl S. Buck, oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller, film producer David O. Selznick, and a number of diplomats and politicians.³¹ The UCR played a significant part in shaping Americans' perceptions of China and the Chinese before and after the Federal government inaugurated its own policy of using strategic propaganda to display positive images of China to American audiences. One of the UCR's main plans was to "properly" educate Americans about their Chinese allies in order to raise more funds from the general American public. To achieve this goal at a time when the Chinese Exclusion Act was still in place, it emphasised that the interests of the Chinese people paralleled those of Americans and – in UCR's campaign materials – the Chinese themselves were also presented as akin or similar to Americans. Consistent with the image of the Chiangs in *Time* (as a modern and religious couple), UCR materials tended to push the idea that a "New China" had been constructed under the leadership of the Chinese Nationalist government, while also emphasising the point that the Chinese were worthy allies on the battlefield. According to a UCR article published in *The Atlanta Constitution*, for example, the Chinese were described as being equal to the Americans and the British facing the "mutual enemy" Japan in Burma.³²

UCR organised hundreds of meetings with speeches, created numerous pamphlets and postcards, sold many types of merchandise with a Chinese theme (tea, cookbooks, stuffed pandas, and Christmas cards) and, consequently, was able to raise millions of dollars to help

²⁹ Chiang on *Time* cover in 1936, retrieved from *Time* magazine covers archive: <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19361109,00.html>

³⁰ Chiangs on *Time* cover in 1938, retrieved from *Time* magazine covers archive: <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19380103,00.html>

³¹ Jespersen, *American Images of China*, pp. 47-48.

³² "United China Relief," *The Atlanta Constitution* (17 April 1942).

China. The agency was very successful, greatly facilitating the notion that a “New China” was emerging that needed the help of the United States. However, some very traditional and stereotypical views of China were also still to be found in UCR documents. According to T. Christopher Jespersen, for example, B. A. Garside, the Executive Director of UCR, mentioned that his reason for advocating aid to China was because of his trust in the economic potential of China in the post-war world—essentially the old idea that a Chinese market of 400 million customers was awaiting to be developed. Garside optimistically predicted:

In the years just ahead, a free and independent China will turn to us for all the products that American industry and mechanical genius can produce ... both American and China [will] climb to new heights of prosperity.³³

Realistic or not, UCR’s initial 1941 campaign, based on an image of a “New China” in need of America’s help, proved a tremendous success, ultimately raising over 3 million dollars in that year alone.

UCR also recognised the influence exerted by the film industry, and it shrewdly utilised its Hollywood connections to attract people and raise funds. UCR board member David O. Selznick, being also director of the Hollywood Victory Committee, invited many Hollywood big names, including Charlie Chaplin, Loretta Young, and Fred Allen, to help raise money through broadcasting programmes. UCR even began in 1942 to produce films itself, including documentaries *Western Front* (1942), *China-First to Fight* (1943), *Here Is China* (1944), and *Report on China* (1945-46).³⁴ These films were aligned with UCR’s other campaign materials to argue that a new “democratic” China was emerging under American

³³ Jespersen, *American Images of China*, p. 57.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 62-66.

influence, and that a Chiang-led China would be of great importance to the US in the post-war world. For example, in *Here is China* (a film introducing China to American citizens), the narrator describes China as a beautiful eastern country, where people are peaceful and hard-working in character. “Today, our soldiers and theirs fight together on many battle fields,” the narrator asserts. “Our flyers and theirs guard the China sky side by side, so we want to know more about these people of China, our friends and our allies. How they live and work, and about their country, which many of us will visit in days to come.”³⁵ This strategy of exaggerating the importance of the Chinese Nationalist government to the US and advancing an inflated image of Chiang together with an over-optimistic view of his leadership, as Schaller argues, though it paid off in terms of war mobilisation, would eventually become harmful to both countries in the long-run – especially after the Chinese Communist party came to power in 1949.³⁶

³⁵ *Here is China* (1944, United China Relief, dir. Unknown).

³⁶ Schaller, *The United States and China*, p. 60-61. Schaller also argues that FDR hoped that China would become one of the Four Policemen after World War II. However, after he met Chiang at the Cairo conference in late 1943, FDR began to doubt the generalissimo's value as an ally, and finally abandoned this idea in 1944-45.



(Figure 5.5: The illustration above is a poster of UCR, emphasising the image of the Chinese people fighting the Japanese, a message also articulated through many wartime films produced by Hollywood, e.g. *Dragon Seed* [1944] and *China Sky* [1945])³⁷

Meanwhile in Hollywood, as discussed in the previous chapter, film-makers had begun to exploit Americans' growing curiosity about Far East affairs and had produced a number of films in the 1930s foregrounding China as a war-racked state. As the Sino-Japanese conflict worsened and Japan's encroachments on China's territory expanded by the late 1930s, it became increasingly clear that the image of China itself as a permanently chaotic state peopled by ignorant peasants had become unacceptable to many American internationalists. After the US declared war on Japan in 1941, Hollywood, under the influence both of non-governmental humanitarian agencies (particularly UCR) and the Federal government, gradually created a romanticised construction of China and its people that had never been

³⁷ Martha Sawyers, "China First to Fight!: United China Relief Participating in National War Fund," World War Poster Collection from University of North Texas. Retrieved from: <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc367/>

projected on the big screen before.

The Formation of US Propaganda Agencies in World War II

When World War II broke out in Europe in September 1939, the United States did not have a formal propaganda agency. According to Richard W. Steele, President Roosevelt initially relied on influential individuals and private organisations to counter isolationist sentiment and to arouse active support at first for aiding the allies and, eventually, for US participation in the war. Roosevelt was slow and hesitant in the beginning about creating a propaganda agency because he did not want to repeat the mistake of Woodrow Wilson's Committee on Public Information (CPI), which had been widely criticised for its exaggeration and distortion of the truth during World War I. However, the situation in Europe, especially the threat to the Great Britain, posed great danger to America's security. While many Americans still hoped to avoid participation in the war, President Roosevelt believed it was important to launch a propaganda strategy directed towards building up preparedness on the home front.³⁸

Roosevelt's first step was the creation of the Office of Government Reports (OGR) in September 1939. As Lowell Mellett, the director of the OGR, explained, the role of the new organisation lay in "assisting the President in clearing information between the federal government and state and local governments and the general public."³⁹ The OGR first adopted a policy of "informational" propaganda, a mild strategy aiming at disseminating positive facts while withholding negative news of the situation on the battlefield. This strategy aimed at building up public confidence in the US military and encouraging support

³⁸ Richard W. Steele. "Preparing the Public for War: Efforts to Establish a National Propaganda Agency, 1940-41," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 70, no. 6 (1970), pp. 1640-53.

³⁹ Lowell Mellett. "The Office of Government Reports," *Public Administration Review*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Winter 1941), p. 126.

for President Roosevelt's decisions concerning the war. The Bureau of Motion Pictures (BMP), which later became an important point of contact between the federal government and the American film industry after being transferred to the Office of War Information in 1942, was originally the department of OGR in charge of film activities. The BMP was influential in framing the wartime representations of China and the Chinese as it conveyed the American government's views on how to deal with allies and enemies in American films during the Second World War.⁴⁰

In March 1941, Roosevelt created a Division of Information under the Office of Emergency Management (OEM), which continued informational propaganda focusing on the press. But some Americans who supported early US intervention in the war instead proposed "inspirational" propaganda since this would, in their opinion, be more effective in meeting their political needs. Although a number of administration officials (Mellett, for example) continued to insist only on informational propaganda, by early 1941 Roosevelt had come to support a stronger propaganda effort on lines advocated by the interventionists. In consequence, he signed an executive order creating the Office of Civilian Defense (OCD) on 20 May 1941.⁴¹ The original purpose of this agency was to increase American citizenry's sense of involvement in the war, even though the United States itself was not yet an active participant.⁴² However, according to Richard W. Steele, the director of the OCD, former liberal Republican mayor of New York Fiorello La Guardia, did not appear to understand what the president wanted, and Roosevelt finally took the propaganda function away from OCD and created the Office of Facts and Figures (OFF) in October 1941.⁴³

⁴⁰ Cedric Larson, "The Domestic Motion Picture Work of the Office of War Information," *Hollywood Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Summer, 1948), p. 436.

⁴¹ Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, p. 54.

⁴² Schaller, *The United States and China*, p. 63.

⁴³ Richard W. Steele, *Propaganda in an Open Society: The Roosevelt Administration and the Media, 1933-1941* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985), pp. 93-95.

After Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and the US's entry into the war, Roosevelt appointed Lowell Mellett as the coordinator of government films on 17 December 1941.⁴⁴ This decision suggested that the American government had now begun to use film as a tool for wartime propaganda purposes. Movies would be used strategically and "properly" to portray allies and enemies. On 13 June 1942, a few months after Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt endeavoured to create a more effective and cohesive propaganda effort by merging agencies with overlapping functions (including OFF, OGR, and the Division of Information of the OEM) to create the Office of War Information (OWI).⁴⁵ The creation of OWI signalled the Federal government's determination to mobilise the mass media behind the war effort.

The educational agendas of UCR were warmly supported by the Federal government, especially after the creation of the OWI in 1942. Records suggest that there were strong connections between UCR and governmental agencies such as OWI and China Defense Supplies (an agency chaired by T. V. Soong and based in the US, dealing with American Lend-Lease aid to China), and they collaborated closely on film matters. For instance, in promoting UCR's documentary film *Western Front* (1942), officers from the OGR (later merged into OWI) and other federal departments offered to help organise UCR's campaign and to promote the film in order to show it "as extensively as possible."⁴⁶ Arch A. Mercey, Deputy Co-ordinator of Government Films, liaised with different governmental departments to help the UCR's campaign drive, which included borrowing Oliver Griswold, an officer from the Department of Agriculture who was said to be a good promoter, to work on "non-theatrical showings of the China Relief picture." Mercey also suggested Roberta N. Cook, Assistant Chief of the Research, Reports and Information Department, to plan and organise

⁴⁴ Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*, p. 56.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴⁶ Arch A. Mercey to Lowell Mellett (1942, undated), box 1453, Reference Group 208, OWI files, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

city-wide showings of the UCR film.⁴⁷ In September 1942, Mercey also facilitated negotiations between OWI (BMP) and China Defense Supplies to achieve an agreement on what footages of China were considered appropriate to be utilised in American films (whether produced by the US government, Hollywood, or agencies like UCR) to maximise war propaganda efforts.⁴⁸

After the successful release of *Western Front*, promoted by the US government, UCR took a more initiating role in seeking help directly from OWI during film productions. In October 1942, when UCR was short of quality footage about China for their upcoming film of 1943, Ralph B. Frye, director of UCR's motion picture department, wrote to OWI:

It occurs to me that the United States Government must have a lot of new China film ... Would it be possible for us ... to cooperate with your office in the production of a new picture to be released through your service? Our principal aim is the education of the American people about China, her present plight and her future possibilities.⁴⁹

Later, a letter in 1943 from UCR confirming that a film on Chinese ambassador Wei Tao-Ming, produced by the OWI, would be used in UCR's upcoming documentary further underlined the fact that co-operation on film productions did exist for fund-raising and morale-boosting purposes between the two agencies. Such collaborations suggest that the US government recognised UCR's contribution to the war effort, appreciated its educational programmes, and, more importantly, agreed with it on its constructions of the Chinese in campaign materials, which were believed to maximise war propaganda outcomes.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Arch A. Mercey to Nelson Poyner, "Cooperation on Chinese Pictures," 29 September, box 1453, Reference Group 208, OWI files.

⁴⁹ Ralph B. Frye to Paul C. Reed, 21 October 1942, box 1453, Reference Group 208, OWI files.

Besides OWI's affiliations with groups like UCR, the agency had a particular impact on wartime commercial films produced by Hollywood. To a considerable extent, indeed, the OWI shaped the filmic representations of the allies and enemies of the US during World War II. The PCA, on the other hand, although it kept operating throughout the war years, was often overshadowed by wartime propaganda agencies like the OWI. "Attentive to and restrictive on matters of morality and propriety," Thomas Doherty observes, "the Code was silent on crucial war-specific lessons."⁵⁰ In the summer of 1942, BMP (under the OWI) circulated a "Government Information Manual" for the motion picture industry to "instruct" writers, directors and producers regarding various war themes. The manual was later updated by OWI on a regular basis to inform the industry about current war priorities. Although the bureau insisted that "the suggestions (in the manual) are simply suggestions which individual motion picture producers are free to follow or ignore," the fact that OWI carried weight with the Office of Censorship, which was in control of export licences, made its manual, as well as any other suggestion the agency provided, vitally important for Hollywood to take into consideration.⁵¹ According to Clayton R. Koppes, "the OWI had more than patriotic suasion at its command."⁵²

In the original manual circulated on 8 June 1942, it explicitly identified all the allied nations. Since images of the Chinese people had been constructed in American popular culture over centuries in a very derogatory way (frequently depicting them as cheap labour, thieves, and ignorant peasants), the manual felt obliged repeatedly to emphasise that wartime film productions should stress the notion that China had become both a modern country and a

⁵⁰ Doherty, *Projections of War*, p. 38.

⁵¹ Clayton R. Koppes, "Regulating the Screen: The Office of War Information and the Production Code Administration," in Thomas Schatz, ed., *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1997), p. 269; BMP's updated manual for the motion picture industry, p. 1, 29 April 1943, box 1438, OWI files.

⁵² Koppes, "Regulating the Screen," p. 269.

worthy ally in the war:

We must overcome a traditional patronizing attitude toward China and recognize that China has become a *world power* ... China is a great nation, cultured and liberal, with whom, inevitably, we will be closely bound in the world that is to come.⁵³

It took OWI almost a year after its foundation to figure out exactly which aspects of China and the qualities of the Chinese people they wanted Hollywood to bring home to the American public. In this running-in period for the newly-founded OWI (roughly from late 1942 to early 1943), the agency reviewed several films on China produced in the earlier period (from the late 1930s and the beginning of the 1940s) regarding their re-issues or overseas circulations. In OWI's reviews of these earlier films, a drastically-changed set of standards and priorities on what was now considered proper in presenting China to the American public can be observed in comparison with when the industry had been solely under PCA self-regulation.

1942-1943: OWI's experimental period

The OWI began its retrospective film reviews and analyses with the most influential (and controversial) pictures about China produced in the late 1930s. For example, *The General Died at Dawn* (1936), *The Good Earth* (1937), and *Barricade* (1939) were the first to be investigated after OWI was founded. In the case of *The General Died at Dawn*, the contrasting attitudes of the PCA (during the film's production in 1936) and the OWI (when the film was found re-circulating in 1942) in treating the Chinese on film, as well as the two agencies' divergent responses to the criticisms of Chinese Consul T. K. Chang, exemplified the different focuses of the two agencies.

⁵³ BMP's original manual for the motion picture industry, 8 June 1942, box 1438, OWI files.

The General Died at Dawn tells the story of its hero O'Hara (Gary Cooper) and his struggles with the Chinese villain—a warlord named General Yang (Akim Tamiroff). Similar to other warlord films produced in the 1930s, General Yang is presented as a “Robber Baron” who has occupied a province and bled it white. O'Hara, an American soldier of fortune, sides with the oppressed people in the province. He is entrusted with funds by the local militia to purchase arms and ammunitions in Shanghai. Knowing O'Hara's mission and himself needing money for the same purpose, General Yang sends a beautiful American lady, Judy Perrie (Madeleine Carroll), to lure O'Hara into a trap set up by the general. O'Hara loses the ammunition funds to Yang because of Judy. However, she regrets her wrongdoings and decides to help O'Hara retrieve the money. In doing so, she falls in love with him. The film ends with Yang being shot by one of his own guards, and his soldiers all kill themselves following the general's last command since they have failed to protect him. Witnessing the Chinese soldiers killing each other at the end, the American couple are left cold and confused over the incomprehensible Chinese.

The majority of Chinese characters (the bandit and his army) in *The General Died at Dawn* are depicted as unintelligible aliens, living by a strange set of “Chinese principles.” The story deals heavily with a complex concept of “face” (represented as a code of honour that Chinese people are expected to follow as gospel truth). In the film, General Yang tells O'Hara that the Chinese would rather die than risk “losing face,” and the final mass suicide of Yang's army is presented as a means of “saving face.” What exactly such “face” consists of is never explicitly explained in the film, so the Chinese are shown blindly following an obscure rule, even at the expense of their lives. Reviewer Gus McCarthy, writing in the cinema trade journal *Motion Picture Herald*, himself followed this trend by defining “face” simply as “the complex, immutable factor of Chinese civilization that remains forever

mysterious, incomprehensible to the Occidental.”⁵⁴

In 1936, after the first script of the film was submitted to the PCA, Joseph I. Breen at once sensed the likelihood that the studio involved, Paramount, would encounter problems with Chinese officials. Breen believed it would be in the studio’s best interest to obtain advice from the Chinese over the script before shooting began.⁵⁵ According to the PCA documents, the studio claimed to have sought advice from General Tu Hsiu-ting, the technical adviser sent to Hollywood by the Chinese government to supervise the production of *The Good Earth*.⁵⁶ After the film opened in Manila, in the Philippines, according to a cable to the Breen Office, Paramount claimed that it had been viewed by Chinese officials who were also satisfied with the content. This feedback made the studio confident that the same version could be used throughout the world without offending the Chinese Nationalist government.⁵⁷ However, the release of the film in the US evoked immediate and vehement criticism from the Chinese government and, as a consequence, all Paramount productions – which had been banned after the release of *Shanghai Express* – were once again barred from being shown in China.

Seemingly under pressure from his company’s foreign relations department, Adolph Zukor, the chair of the Board of the Paramount Studio, was quick to promise the Chinese government that the studio would not produce any further offensive films about China while pointing out that *The General Died at Dawn* had been made before he became the head of the studio.⁵⁸ Zukor’s promise pacified the Chinese authorities and helped get the ban on his

⁵⁴ McCarthy, “General Died at Dawn,” *Motion Picture Herald*, p. 16.

⁵⁵ Joseph I. Breen to John Hammell, 18 April 1936, *The General Died at Dawn* file, PCA files.

⁵⁶ John Hammell to Joseph I. Breen, 14 September 1937, *The General Died at Dawn* file, PCA files.

⁵⁷ “Cable Received Relative to ‘The General Died at Dawn’”, 9 November 1936, *The General Died at Dawn* file, PCA files.

⁵⁸ T. K. Chang to Liu Chieh, 29 September 1942, *The General Died at Dawn* file, Motion Picture Reviews and Analysis, box 3516, OWI files.

company lifted. However, the generally derogatory portrayal of the Chinese remained in the picture. *The General Died at Dawn*, though resented by many Chinese, was nominated for three Oscars, including the Best Supporting Actor for Akim Tamiroff as General Yen, the Chinese warlord.⁵⁹ Studios as well as the PCA were largely indifferent to the sensitivities of the Chinese themselves in spite of the fact that Chinese subjects and themes had become increasingly attractive to film-makers.

With the American involvement in the Second World War, and especially after the creation of the OWI, this situation changed dramatically. Chinese officials, whose country had now become an official ally to the United States in the Pacific region, became – with the support of the Federal Government – more actively engaged with the American film industry. In September 1942, T. K. Chang, the Chinese consul in Los Angeles who took a close interest in film matters, reported to the Chinese Embassy in Washington about a re-circulation of *The General Died at Dawn* in the Washington area. According to Chang, his predecessor Vice-Consul Kiang Yi-Seng, had strongly objected to certain offensive features of the film prior to its production. The studio refused to listen to the Chinese vice-consul, claiming to have consulted with General Tu who, it was claimed, was content with the film.⁶⁰ According to Chang, the replacement of Tu by another adviser in supervising *The Good Earth* in 1936 was a punishment of Tu for his tolerance concerning Paramount's representations of the Chinese in *The General Died at Dawn*.⁶¹ Chang thus insisted that the re-circulation of the film meant reopening an "old wound," which was particularly unfortunate at a time when the US and China were allies in a war. He argued that *The General Died at Dawn*, in the current context,

⁵⁹ *The General Died at Dawn* was nominated for Actor in a Supporting Role (Akim Tamiroff), Cinematography (Victor Milner), and Scoring, Oscar Awards Database: <http://awardsdatabase.oscars.org>.

⁶⁰ T. K. Chang to Hon. Liu Chieh, 29 September 1942, *The General Died at Dawn* file, OWI files.

⁶¹ Ibid.

presented “China exactly as the Japanese propagandists have been trying to describe in the past years.”⁶²

The reissue of the film, therefore, became a matter taken up by the OWI. According to an OWI inter-office memorandum, officer Earl Minderman, after watching the film with the Chinese officials (T. K. Chang and J. Z. Huang of the Chinese Embassy) and Harry Price, the treasurer of the China Defense Supplies, agreed with the Chinese officials’ view of the film, seeing *The General Died at Dawn* as a hinderance to mutual understanding between the US and China and concluded that it was impossible to make it acceptable by any further revisions:

All the Chinese characters in the film are either corrupt, barbarically cruel and fanatical or stupid. The net impression is one of repugnance for China and the Chinese people ... At this time we are fighting for our lives, when we need all the help that any ally can give us, it is necessary that the American people get a realistic and sympathetic picture of the Chinese people. Anything that create hatreds and distrust of our allies is harmful to the war efforts. This picture does that.⁶³

BMP director Lowell Mellett subsequently contacted Russell Holman, Paramount’s Eastern Production Manager, and “reminded” him that China and the United States were now allies in a desperate worldwide struggle, and that he hoped Paramount would be able “to take whatever action [seemed] indicated to advance [that] purpose.”⁶⁴ Paramount yielded but initially proposed simply to withdraw the film after the end of the current contracts made

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ J. Z. Huang (secretary to T. V. Soong) to Lowell Mellett, 6 November 1942; and Tsune-Chi Yu to Lowell Mellett, 6 November 1942, both from *The General Died at Dawn* file, OWI files; Earl Minderman to Lowell Mellett, Inter-office memorandum, 6 November 1942, *The General Died at Dawn* file, OWI files.

⁶⁴ Lowell Mellett to Russell Holman, 10 November 1942, *The General Died at Dawn* file, OWI files.

with the movie-theatres concerned. Mellett, however, found this solution unsatisfactory and Holman was finally persuaded to promise to cancel the remaining exhibitions of the film and substitute another Paramount production for *The General Died at Dawn*.⁶⁵ The OWI's more active approach designed to prevent unfavourable representations of the Chinese to the American public proved significantly different from the PCA's perfunctory attitude and reluctance to deal with the Chinese in the pre-war years.

Another film called *Barricade*, originally produced by Twentieth-Century Fox in 1939 (under the title *By the Dawn's Early Light*) and then recirculated in 1943, further exemplifies the different stances of the PCA and OWI on films about China. Like many warlord films of the 1930s, *Barricade* tells a story of three Americans (one of whom is an American consul stationed in China) struggling to survive against a group of Chinese bandits. In September 1936, when RKO (prior to the involvement of Twentieth-Century Fox) made the decision to produce the film, Vice-Consul Kiang approached the company expressing his concern about possible inaccuracies in depicting the Chinese and offering to read the script before it was put into production.⁶⁶ Edward Kaufman of RKO harshly declined Kiang's request, claiming the film was not about Chinese life but three Americans, one of them an American Consul, in China during a bandit uprising. Kaufman insisted that the film would not reflect badly on any government – including the Chinese – in spite of the fact that the story centred on an American diplomat's suffering in a Chinese political disturbance.⁶⁷ Kaufman told Kiang that he would not send a script to anyone before submitting it to the Hays Office, and he insisted that the studio was ready for production with or without the approval of Chinese officials.⁶⁸

In the following months, Kiang wrote two letters to Kaufman informing him further

⁶⁵ Russell Holman to Lowell Mellett, 17 December 1942, *The General Died at Dawn* file, OWI files.

⁶⁶ Yi-Seng Kiang to Edward Kaufman, 10 September 1936, *Barricade* file, PCA files.

⁶⁷ Edward Kaufman to Yi-Seng Kiang, 11 September 1936, *Barricade* file, PCA files.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

of the possible difficulties RKO might run into with the Chinese government while reminding him of the furore over *The General Died at Dawn* in China. Kiang stated in his letter dated 23 November 1936:

The Chinese Government has often objected to the injection into a picture of a bandit uprising in China, not so much against such a thing itself as the way in which it is usually depicted on the screen.⁶⁹

RKO, however, completely ignored Kiang's letters and sold the story on to Twentieth-Century Fox. In May 1938, when Fox was about to make the film, T. K. Chang wrote to both the Breen Office at the PCA and Colonel Frederick L. Herron, the foreign manager of the MPPDA, to protest against the story of the film, especially for its depictions of the mistreatments that an American Consul had received in China. Chang insisted that

... there has been no incident wherein an American Consulate in China has been molested in such a way as depicted in the proposed picture. This episode, if allowed to be shown, will therefore [be] bound to arouse misunderstanding of the true condition in China.⁷⁰

Colonel Jason S. Joy, the previous head of the Public Relations and Studio Relations Committee of the MPPDA between 1922 and 1932 and now the director of Public Relations for Twentieth-Century Fox, responded to Joseph Breen expressing surprise at Chang's objections, claiming that he personally had seen the correspondence between Kiang and Kaufman, and that RKO's plans for the film had been "wholly satisfactory to Mr. Kiang."⁷¹

⁶⁹ Kiang to Kaufman, 14 September 1936, and Kiang to Kaufman, 23 November 1936, *Barricade* file, PCA files.

⁷⁰ T. K. Chang to Joseph I. Breen, 18 May 1938, *Barricade* file, PCA files.

⁷¹ Jason S. Joy to Joseph I. Breen, 25 May 1938, *Barricade* file, PCA files. For information about Colonel Joy, see MPPDA Digital Archive at: <https://mppda.flinders.edu.au/people/297>

Although Chang subsequently provided all the necessary evidences showing the Chinese official had never been content with the story and had provided a list of suggested changes that he would have liked the studio to consider, the film was eventually made by the studio without much alteration and was released with the approval of the PCA.⁷²

In a letter from Joseph Breen to Frederick Herron, regarding a series of films about China, Breen expressed his full trust in Joy's handling of the situation with the Chinese consul, believing him to be doing it "quite intelligently."⁷³ *Barricade (By the Dawn's Early Light)* was not a particularly successful film, either in terms of the box office or its critical reception. However, the two-year interactions concerning it among Chinese officials, the studios, the Breen Office and the MPPDA's foreign department reflected in a straightforward way the Chinese consul's insignificance when it came to influencing Hollywood's representations of China and Chinese people, even before the dissolution in 1938 of the CMPCC, the Chinese censorship committee which often backed the protests of the Chinese consuls in Hollywood.

The situation changed markedly during wartime. When *Barricade* was found re-circulating without authorisation in 1943, the OWI took the initiative immediately, contacting the studio as well as the Chinese consul to avoid any possible ill-feelings from China. According to OWI's internal correspondence, its office was fully aware of the controversy between the studios (RKO and 20th Century-Fox) and Chinese officials since 1936.⁷⁴ Based on the OWI's analysis of the film itself, the portrayals of the Chinese in *Barricade* were considered unacceptable and derogatory, and the film was also declared to be detrimental to the war effort:

⁷² T. K. Chang to Frederick L. (Ted.) Herron, 16 June 1938 [list of objections attached], *Barricade* file, PCA files.

⁷³ Joseph I. Breen to Frederick L. Herron, 6 September 1938, *Barricade* file, PCA files.

⁷⁴ Ulric Bell to Robert Riskin (Chief of Bureau of Motion Pictures), 25 June 1943, box 3511, *Barricade* file, OWI files.

... the portrayal of the Chinese people themselves contributes nothing toward a better American understanding of one of our allies ... it is specifically stated that the action takes place after the Japanese invasion, yet the villains of the piece are Chinese bandits rather than the Japanese—a conception which might very well be resented by our Chinese allies ... those Chinese with whom we have major contact in the story are the American Consulate house-servants, who speak pidgin English and verge on the routine film characterization of the Chinese as menials.⁷⁵

In addition to the representations of the Chinese, the male protagonist, an American Consul, being presented in China as a “forgotten man” by his home country was also considered inappropriate because, the reviewers reasoned, such presentation might mislead spectators into believing that the US government was “indifferent in matter of foreign relations.”⁷⁶ Under the pressure of the OWI, Twentieth-Century Fox withdrew the film at once, explaining it away as a “loose print” being circulated without the knowledge of the studio.⁷⁷ *Barricade* was banned by the OWI from any foreign distribution from 1943.⁷⁸

OWI censorship was exceptionally strict in terms of the ways in which the images of US allies were presented in motion pictures. Even *The Good Earth*, a film previously celebrated for its sympathetic representation of Chinese peasants in 1937, had become unacceptable to the OWI in 1943. The film was the highest-grossing Hollywood picture of 1937, and Breen on behalf of the PCA had approved the film for distribution in China in 1937 with only minor deletions. By 1943, however, *The Good Earth* had become inappropriate to both governments. According to OWI documents, reviewers of the agency and T. K. Chang (accompanied by Colonel Waterson Rothacker of the OWI) had viewed the film separately,

⁷⁵ Feature viewing of *Barricade*, 16 June 1943, *Barricade* file, OWI files.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Bell to Riskin, 25 June 1943, *Barricade* file, OWI files.

⁷⁸ Feature review of *Barricade*, 16 June 1943, *Barricade* file, OWI files.

but all expressed objections against the same elements of the film. These included the female protagonist being referred to as a “slave” and suggestions of daughters being sold into slavery, the presentation of concubinage in the latter half of the story, and the scene of looters being shot during the Revolution.⁷⁹ More importantly, perhaps, the OWI was wary that since the film was not set during a precise period, “people knowing nothing of China or Chinese history [would] think that [the condition of China shown in the film] is fairly contemporary.”⁸⁰ All of these aspects, it was concluded, displayed an “Old China” to audiences which could well jeopardise many American organisations’ joint efforts (for example, UCR, the OWI, and China Defense Supplies) to fashion an image of a “New China” in American mainstream media. Ironically, therefore, *The Good Earth*—a film produced with significant involvement of the Chinese government over four years in the 1930s—was declared ineligible for international distribution by OWI in 1943.

The OWI’s anxiety about how properly to present the US’s allies to both domestic and international audiences partially originated, in fact, from the relative success of Japanese propaganda efforts. According to Chiou-ling Yeh, as early as 1882 (the year when the Chinese Exclusion Act was enacted), Japanese propagandists had begun to capitalise on America’s racism and hostility toward the Chinese in mainland China.⁸¹ Such Japanese efforts to alienate China and the US during World War II pushed the Federal government to come forward with a strategy to prevent further deterioration of the US-China relationship. As a gesture in this direction, the US government repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943 and placed Chinese immigrants on a quota basis for entry. This amendment allowed 105

⁷⁹ Feature viewing of *The Good Earth*, 25 August 1943, *The Good Earth* file, box 3517, OWI files; Waterson Rothacker to Warren Pierce, OWI Overseas Branch, 26 August 1943, *The Good Earth* file, OWI files.

⁸⁰ Rothacker to Pierce, 26 August 1943, *The Good Earth* file, OWI files.

⁸¹ Chiou-ling Yeh, “Images of Equality and Freedom: The Representation of Chinese American Men, *America Today* Magazine, and the Cultural Cold War in Asia,” *Journal of America Studies*, vol. 53, no. 2 (January 2018), p. 512.

Chinese persons to be accepted annually for admission to the US. Unlike the quota for European immigration, which was based on nationalities, however, the quota for Chinese people was based on ethnicity. This meant that Chinese immigrants to the US from all over the world (and with whatever citizenship) were limited to the annual quota of 105. Furthermore, with the existing Asian Exclusion Act (the Immigration Act of 1924) and other strict measures still in place, there remained little chance for Chinese people to be naturalised in the US even after 1943.⁸² The repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act was carried out merely to rebut the Japanese propaganda warfare against the US rather than genuinely to protect Chinese immigrants' legal rights in the US.⁸³ Yet it did have positive consequences for the Chinese population in the United States, including a noticeable increase in Chinese immigration into America – the Chinese population had grown by 51.8 percent and reached 117,629 in 1950 – although many of these new arrivals were admitted through non-quota statuses such as “family reunification and as refugees.”⁸⁴

The year 1943 itself saw important changes to Chinese immigrants' lives in American society—with the expanding war industries eagerly recruiting people regardless of their gender and racial heritages, some Chinese immigrants were able to raise themselves from a labour-only status to white-collar and even managerial positions.⁸⁵ Moreover, under the exigencies of the war, the Federal government, after reviewing a series of films about China produced before the foundation of the OWI, most of which were deemed unsuitable to be re-circulated, had begun systematically and strategically to reconstruct the images of China and Chinese people in American films after 1943.

⁸² “Repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, 1943,” Office of the Historian, retrieved on 16 October 2019 from: <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1937-1945/chinese-exclusion-act-repeal>

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Yeh, “Images of Equality and Freedom,” p. 508.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 513.

After 1943: OWI's strategic guides for Hollywood to reconstruct the Chinese in films

Since its foundation, the OWI had begun to liaise with Hollywood to help promote government propaganda via the BMP, headed by Lowell Mellett. Elmer Davis, head of the OWI, believed that “the easiest way to propagandize people is to let a propaganda theme go in through an entertainment picture when people do not realize they are being propagandized.”⁸⁶ As mentioned earlier, a “Government Information Manual” was circulated in Hollywood by the agency on a regular basis, defining a series of updated war needs which required co-operation from the film industry. According to the manual, four general factors were listed for film-makers to bear in mind while making films. These were: whether the picture would help to win the war; whether it was honest; whether it would still be important when it reached the screen; and whether it would be suitable for overseas distribution.⁸⁷ During the OWI's experimental period (1942-1943), a more detailed and strategic plan on how to utilise motion pictures to present the US's new Chinese ally was gradually formulated. In October 1942, the OWI and the Chinese Nationalist Government had identified several aspects as important in portraying China and the Chinese people in any future American film about China. According to a memorandum of a meeting between the OWI and the Chinese representatives, these aspects were:

- 1, The central theme should be the interdependence of China and the United States, two great nations facing each other across the Pacific. If these two nations can integrate their economic, spiritual, and political resources, one of the biggest factors for world security has been developed. China can be a tremendous stabilizing influence in Asia.

⁸⁶ Koppes, “Regulating the Screen,” *Boom and Bust*, p. 269.

⁸⁷ Updated version of the Government Information Manual, 29 April 1943, box 1537, OWI files, pp. 2-3.

2, The second point, perhaps, difficult to portray with existing footage, is the development of the new China. The new China will utilize agriculture scientific developments, irrigation, and crop rotation. There will be reconstruction in the field of health.

3, China has a good deal to receive from the West, especially the developments of science and mass production, but China too has a great deal to give of spiritual value. She has the accumulated wisdom of the ages. She has developed maturity in human relationships. Religious schisms are unknown in China ...⁸⁸

In essence, these three points, especially the notion of a “New China,” were the crucial messages OWI wanted every feature film about China to convey during the war years. The Chinese Nationalists, for obvious reasons, were delighted with OWI’s support for portraying China in such positive light in Hollywood films, something they had been endeavouring to achieve since the beginning of the 1930s. The Chinese government actively collaborated with the US government, which ultimately and more directly benefited the Nationalists themselves in gaining more financial aid from the United States.

In 1943, when the US government decided to send a mission to China to shoot footage for a government film programme, the Nationalist government required it to have an advisory committee, selected by T. V. Soong, in order to review the completed film and to be allowed to edit it before putting into use by “the War Department, the OWI, and any other agency.”⁸⁹ In addition, these Chinese officials also “assisted” OWI in composing a detailed list of suggested themes about China that were worth being filmed by the mission, and might also prove relevant for any possible such shootings in the future. The list covers a wide range of matters about China, including the effectiveness of the Chinese army, “comradeship

⁸⁸ Memorandum of a meeting between OWI (Arch A. Mercey and Edgar Dale) and the Chinese representatives, 30 October 1942, box 1537, OWI files.

⁸⁹ Earl Minderman to Lowell Mellett, Four Point Program Re Mission to China, telephone from Harry Price, 3 April 1943, box 1537, OWI files.

between Chinese and American troops,” Chinese guerrillas, “a day in the life of General Chiang Kai-shek,” modern transportations in China, as well as Chinese education, natural resources and industrial co-operatives.⁹⁰ In short, the two governments gradually came to a unified opinion on how China should be presented as an ancient country in transformation into a democratic and modern nation—one very much alike the United States itself—with its people as worthy allies for the US during and after the war.

Several suggested themes from the above list, though originally proposed for the shooting of the government film programme, were also reflected in some wartime commercial films. Paramount’s *China* (1943), directed by John Farrow, for example, used wartime education in China as its general backdrop and told a story of an American hero’s personal transformation—from an isolationist to a freedom fighter—through the journey involved in escorting a group of Chinese students with two other American adults to the interior of China.⁹¹ The final production of *China* satisfied OWI and was considered helpful for the war effort because of the film’s attempt to convince American audiences that fighting for China would ultimately be beneficial for Americans themselves.

China

China is set in late 1941, just before the Pearl Harbour attack. David Jones (Alan Ladd) is an American oil man who sells and trucks oil to the Japanese army. Like many actual American citizens of the time, the character is neutral in the war between China and Japan because he does not feel it concerns him. On his way to Shanghai with his sidekick Johnny Sparrow (William Bendix), his truck is stopped by a Chinese-born American schoolteacher, Carolyn Grant (Loretta Young) alongside her Chinese friend Lin Wei (Sen Yung). By

⁹⁰ “Proposed Themes for Pictures to be Made by Mission to China,” undated, box 1537, OWI files.

⁹¹ John Farrow, dir., *China* (Paramount Pictures, 1943).

threatening him with a pistol, they force Jones to help transport a group of Chinese schoolgirls to Chengdu, launching Jones's involuntary journey with the group. On their way together, Grant continuously preaches to him about why they should help the Chinese youngsters. Jones cannot care less about what she says until he witnesses one of the girls being raped by three Japanese soldiers (suggested by a scene of the soldiers walking out of a room while the girl screams inside), as well as the murder of her entire family and an orphaned baby Johnny had adopted on their way. Jones begins to realise his responsibility for the girls and all the Chinese who need his help, so he joins the Chinese guerrillas and fights side by side with them against the Japanese. At the end of the film, he is told by a Japanese general that Pearl Harbor has just been bombed and a new order is forming in the East. Jones then gives a speech about how China and America will fight together against the Imperial Japanese army, which gives the guerrillas enough time to set off the dynamite that will destroy a Japanese convoy. The convoy is buried in a canyon, together with Jones, while Miss Grant and Johnny take on the unfinished job of driving to Chengdu, mourning the great sacrifice made by Jones.

Both the original script and the complete film had been reviewed by the OWI during 1942-43. According to the OWI's script review of *China*, the agency was pleased with the exploration of American failure, through the character Jones, to offer help to China, which it suggested was an incorrect and unrealistic choice. The agency praised "This frank admission of the American error of attempting to be friendly to the Chinese at the same time that we tried to profit by trading with their – and our – enemies" and thought the film as a whole was "very well done."⁹² After the feature viewing, OWI reviewers Madeline Ruthven and Lillian Bergquist reaffirmed that the film significantly helped the war effort by bringing out "the

⁹² Script review of *China* by Marjorie Thorson and Dorothy B. Jones, 16 November 1942, p. 1, box 3513, *China* file, OWI files.

folly and stupidity of that reasoning which believes it possible for any individual to remain aloof in this war.”⁹³

The story also expressed the idea that helping China was a humane thing to do by inviting the audience to witness Japanese brutality towards the unarmed Chinese—essentially young girls and peasants—from Jones’s point of view. There were many morally-challenging plots included in the script to accentuate the cruelty of the Japanese enemy—they included the murder of an infant and an old couple as well as an instance of rape. The OWI script reviewers were pleased with these sequences because they emphasised the “ruthless nature” of the Japanese, and they even encouraged the film-makers to develop this idea further to show “the relation between such calculated brutality and the [Japanese] New Order’s plan for world conquest.”⁹⁴ The raw depictions of Japanese atrocities were considered exceptionally important to the OWI because, according to the reviewers, “these incidents are not an unfortunate something that just happens; they are part of a deliberate technique of terror which is one of the tactics of fascism.”⁹⁵ In the final film, therefore, audiences were presented with scenes of violence and cruelty, for example, a shot of a dead infant, corpses of Chinese peasants lying on the ground as well as the highly suggestive sequence of a young woman being raped by three Japanese soldiers. In addition, Jones’s killing of the three Japanese soldiers out of revenge is not only justified but becomes an important turning-point for the hero in his realisation that he cannot stand aside anymore. These morally questionable scenes could only make their appearances on the big screen because of the needs of war: it was very unlikely that they would have survived PCA review in peace-time.

Based on the OWI’s comments and suggestions on how to portray the Chinese in the

⁹³ Feature viewing feedback by Madeline Ruthven and Lillian Bergquist, 19 March 1943, p. 1, box 3513, *China* file, OWI files.

⁹⁴ Script review of *China*, *China* file, OWI files, p. 2.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

film, an image of the ideal Chinese allies from an American perspective had now been constructed on screen. In *China*, OWI was impressed by the presentation of the Chinese students steadfastly clinging to education despite wartime conditions. Such a portrayal was entirely consistent with the OWI and the Chinese government's joint suggestions for making films on China. In the section about education in the list of suggestions, it was claimed that many Chinese university students, though forced out of their "fine modern buildings" and forced to study in temporary grass huts (because of Japanese attacks), were going to lead China in preparation "for her comeback against the aggressor" and the modernisation of the nation.⁹⁶ The document insisted that:

The present hardships of these colleges-in-exile are reminiscent of the early days of many American colleges where future presidents, scientific leaders and business magnates received their education. Many thrilling incidents occurred as the universities fled from place to place to escape Japanese bombs and gunfire. The teachers and students travelled by every possible means – by foot, on river junks and sampans, by horsecart. They suffered hunger, starvation, thirst, death. With them, they carried books and scientific equipment ...⁹⁷

Such depictions were well reflected in the film *China*. The group of schoolgirls the three Americans escort are, as introduced by the female protagonist Miss Grant, examples of specially-trained educators who will teach millions of Chinese how by working together they can build a New China. In a conversation between Grant and Jones in the film, she passionately declares: "Mr. Jones, you and I are Americans. Our forefathers fought and died for a new America. These people are fighting for a new China. And if we don't help them now, I for one I'm gonna stop calling myself an American." Her lines precisely echo the

⁹⁶ "Proposed Themes for Pictures to be Made by Mission to China," April 1943, box 1537, OWI files.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

content of the governments' suggestions for films about China, comparing China's experience with that of the United States despite their divergent national histories. OWI appreciated Paramount's efforts to show Chinese youngsters in such a light, which implied that "education in China continues despite the war." The agency claimed that: "It is important for Americans to be informed as to what their allies are doing on the home front, and to know that they are working constructively for a more intelligent post-war world."⁹⁸

In fact, the film suggests that a "New China" had already been developing for years in spite of the ongoing war. In one sequence, in which an old Chinese woman refers to traditional Chinese values, one of the girls contradicts her by saying: "it is the old ones like you that have held China back a thousand years." An obvious friction between "Old China" and "New China" has been intentionally highlighted to bring out the point that the young Chinese were breaking with the past. The "Old China" here represents a coming together of all existing Chinese traditions, and the disapproval of it by the young Chinese themselves suggests that they are inclined more to adopt what they see as new (American-style) values.

Another wartime picture *The Purple Heart* (1944), a story loosely based on the Doolittle Raid trial in 1942, also conveyed a similar message.⁹⁹ In the film, there is a controversial sequence in which a young Chinese patriot, Moy Ling (Benson Fong), publicly assassinates his quisling father, Governor Yuen Chiu Ling (H.T. Tsiang) – and Moy is shown as respected and his patricide appreciated by the American pilots at the trial. In this sequence, Moy appears in a very westernised attire while his father wears a Manchurian-style gown. They are visually distinguished to represent the "New China" (by Moy) and the "Old China" (by Moy's father) in conflict. Although the film-makers aimed to construct a positive "New China" through the character Moy, it was not done by subverting the established stereotype

⁹⁸ Feature viewing of *China*, 19 March 1943, *China* file, OWI files.

⁹⁹ Lewis Milestone, *The Purple Heart* (Twentieth-Century Fox Film Corporation, 1944).

(of the Chinese being treacherous and dishonest) but rather reconfirming it first (with the characterisation of Moy's father) and then showing that the modern young Chinese disapprove of the old Chinese (even through the method of patricide) and embrace American values. Both *China* and *The Purple Heart* implied that the New China admired the United States and was ashamed of its own past.¹⁰⁰



(Figure 5.6: On the left: Moy Ling [Benson Fong] in a suit; on the right: Yuen Chiu Ling [H.T. Tsiang] in a Manchurian gown)

In *China*, there were many new elements introduced to define what a “good” and modern Chinese was. For example, MGM cast genuine Chinese-American actors and actresses for all the principal Chinese roles – something that was considered a significant step forward in representing the Chinese in American films in 1943. As film critic Edith Werner noted, “Paramount achieved what long has been thought impossible [in] assembling a Chinese cast of two dozen leading and minor players.”¹⁰¹ However, despite the genuine Chinese heritage of the performers, they are also presented as self-hating (of Chinese

¹⁰⁰ For more about *The Purple Heart*, see Hye Seung Chung’s *Hollywood Diplomacy*, chapter two “Justified Patricide and (Im)Properly Directed Hatred: Regulating the Representations of Chinese and Japanese in Doolittle Raid Films.”

¹⁰¹ An excerpt from Edith Werner’s review in *N. Y. Mirror*, 22 May 1943, “Chinese Actors in Minor Roles,” reviews of *China*, *China* file, OWI files.

traditions) and highly-Americanised youngsters—they speak fluent English, dressing and behave just like young westerners. While these youthful characters in no sense represented the majority of young people in China at the time, they were favoured by the wartime OWI since they represented a China that was very akin to the United States.

Similar portrayals of Chinese young people are also seen in the picture *China's Little Devils* (1945). The film centres on an American-adopted Chinese orphan, “Little Butch” Dooley (Ducky Louie), who gathers other refugee children in his missionary school to harass the Japanese invaders.¹⁰² At the end of the film, the children sacrifice their young lives rescuing the Flying Tiger “Big Butch” Dooley (Paul Kelly) from a Japanese army prison. These Chinese “Little Devils,” played by real Chinese-American children, are even more Americanised than the schoolgirls in *China*. In the scene in which the refugee children introduce themselves to “Little Butch,” they proudly call themselves “orphans adopted by nice people all over the United States,” who now have American names and speak English as their mother tongue. “Little Butch” gladly greets them as “fellow Americans.” Even the OWI found this sequence inappropriate and advised the studio to avoid the “implication that Americanization of Chinese youngsters carries with it a sense of superiority.”¹⁰³ Nevertheless, the sequence has been preserved in the final film, indicating that Americanisation of Chinese people to make them appear favourably in wartime films was ultimately accepted by the OWI. Indeed, it represented the simplest way to present the Chinese positively to American audiences—by making them less Chinese but more American.

China, *The Purple Heart* and *China's Little Devils* endeavoured to make the Chinese seem “lovable” to American audiences by presenting them as Americanised young people

¹⁰² Monta Bell, *China's Little Devils* (Monogram Pictures, 1945).

¹⁰³ Reviews and analysis of *China's Little Devils*, *China's Little Devils* file, OWI files.

breaking with the “Old China”—a construction that implied that the entire Chinese culture and political system was moving toward that of the United States. Such representations were not only unrealistic, but so patronising that in many respects they showed little difference from the missionaries’ views of the late nineteenth century. An MGM production *Dragon Seed* (1944), however, extended the idea of the Americanised Chinese to the even more problematic reconstruction of them as “white” Chinese.

Dragon Seed

Dragon Seed was an MGM production adapted from Pearl S. Buck’s 1942 novel with the same title.¹⁰⁴ The story is set in 1937 in a peaceful little Chinese village where Jade (Katharine Hepburn) lives with her husband Lao Er (Turhan Bey) and his family. Jade is a perceptive Chinese woman who is eager to read and learn about the world outside her village. She is also the first one in her hometown to realise that the Imperial Japanese Army is approaching and that it might jeopardise the villagers’ simple life. She tries to warn her neighbours about the Japanese, but no one takes her words seriously until the the Japanese troops ravage the village. Jade and Lao Er then leave their home to join the guerrillas. On their return, they find out that many of their relatives have been brutally butchered by the Japanese and Lao Er’s brother-in-law has even become a quisling, collaborating with the Japanese enemy. Jade takes the initiative, punishes the traitor, and poisons a group of Japanese officers. In the end, she persuades Ling Tan (Walter Huston), her father-in-law, and all the other old farmers to burn down their crops, leaving nothing for the Japanese. The villagers retreat to the hillside where the guerrillas are based, and the Chinese young people decide to carry on fighting the Japanese.

The OWI was happy with the final production of *Dragon Seed* in 1944. However, it is

¹⁰⁴ Jack Conway, *Dragon Seed* (MGM, 1944).

clear in the OWI's script reviews and feature viewing of the film that the image of the "perfect" Chinese allies had been constructed by MGM largely under guidance and influence of the OWI itself. The first script submitted to the agency centred on an old Chinese male character, Ling Tan (Jade's father-in-law), who was both reluctant and unready to fight against the Japanese during the years of their invasion. The script ends with "China is dying. Then [Ling Tan] learns that two of the greatest nations in the world [the United States and, presumably, USSR] are now also fighting Japan, and he is infused with new hope."¹⁰⁵ The OWI was dissatisfied with this script mainly for its presentation of an "Old China" – the ignorant and powerless peasants, who are too inadequate to protect themselves. "It does not aid the war effort," reasoned the OWI reviewers, "for Americans to think of the Chinese as a nation composed almost wholly of backward illiterates."¹⁰⁶ Other aspects pointed out by the agency as unacceptable include a traitor being portrayed as too sympathetic, a guerrilla leader who is unsympathetic, and the lack of indication of the "amazing unity" which bound the whole of China together.¹⁰⁷ Besides the fact that Ling Tan's family and their village are portrayed as quite isolated from the rest of China, it was also pointed out that there had been "no presentation of the role of Chiang Kai-shek and his heroic forces, of Madame (Chiang) Kai-shek, who is doing so much to weld China together."¹⁰⁸ Such comment is a reflection of the fact that, by 1943, large sections of the American public had bought into a highly romanticised view of the Chinese Nationalist government, especially after Madame Chiang's high-profile tour of the United States from November 1942 to May 1943.¹⁰⁹

In reality, however, the OWI's "amazing unity" in China was a complete illusion.

¹⁰⁵ Script review of *Dragon Seed*, 10 September 1942, *Dragon Seed* file, box 3515, OWI files, p. 1.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Schaller, *The United States and China*, p. 72.

Chiang Kai-shek believed that Communism – the “heart disease” of the country – posed a greater danger to China than the Japanese aggressors – who were only the “skin disease.”¹¹⁰ There were approximately four million men in the Chinese army in 1942, and only limited numbers of them were under the direct control of Generalissimo Chiang. In the middle of China’s war against Japan, Chiang insisted on using many of his troops, supported by American aid, to guard against the Communists rather than fight the Japanese. One of the strongest Nationalist army groups, with 400,000 troops under the command of General Hu Tsung-nan, was deployed to encircle Yen-an, where the Communists were based.,¹¹¹ The US government made several futile efforts to facilitate a United Front between the Chinese Communists and the Chinese Nationalists in order to maximise their military efforts against Japan rather than each other. In movies, however, the OWI was encouraging Hollywood to create a misleading filmic portrayal of a powerful Nationalist government in control of a unified China, which meant that the Federal government’s war information programme was intentionally deluding the general public with an unrealistic and idealised image of China. Such representations may also, of course, have reflected the Federal government’s own failure fully to comprehend the real political situation in China. The highly romanticised view of the Republic of China projected in wartime films and press helped leave the American public – as well as many personnel in the Federal government – completely unprepared for the Communist take-over in 1949, influencing the subsequent American “Loss of China” narrative in the 1950s.

Despite all the disappointing aspects in the first script of *Dragon Seed*, the OWI very much approved of two elements: “the faith, persistence and unceasing struggle of China against the enemy” was believed to have been demonstrated and, more importantly, the

¹¹⁰ Chang, *Fateful Ties*, p. 175.

¹¹¹ Schaller, *The United States and China*, pp. 74-75.

emphasis on the similarities between the Chinese and the Americans had been successfully brought out. OWI commented in its first script review that:

It is shown that the common people of China are akin to ourselves. The characterization of the individuals in the story are brought down to the human denominator. Most of their day-to-day problems are our problems. In their makeup we find humor, kindness tolerance, determination, greed, weakness – as in ourselves.¹¹²

In a follow-up letter to MGM, the OWI further diagnosed the script and listed the aspects that *Dragon Seed* could potentially contribute to aid the war effort. The letter pointed out that Americans and western people “generally have a patronizing attitude toward the Chinese, they think of them as restaurant keepers, or laundrymen with a glorious past, but an almost hopeless present and future.”¹¹³ The agency argued that the representations of the Chinese in the film should counter this western condescension while ultimately bringing out the “deep-rooted democracy in China.”¹¹⁴ However, the OWI specifically explained that the democracy they were referring to was not the same as Americans believed in but a compromised version, pared down in essence to “self-respect, respect for the individual.”¹¹⁵ These comments inspired the studio to pay extra attention to highlighting the resemblances between the Chinese and Americans both in script revisions and, later, in the film-making itself.

In July 1943, MGM resubmitted a detailed script to both the OWI and T. K. Chang, the Chinese consul in Los Angeles. In this new script, the producers limited the role of Ling Tan (the old man) in the story and made Jade, a young Chinese woman, the heroine of the story. Such a re-arrangement was consistent with war mobilisation efforts on the American home

¹¹² Script review of *Dragon Seed*, 10 September 1942, *Dragon Seed* file, OWI files.

¹¹³ Script review of *Dragon Seed*, 15 September 1942, *Dragon Seed* file, OWI files.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

front—acknowledging women’s role in the society and their families—and also accommodated the list of suggested subjects for an American government film programme (mentioned earlier) proposed by both Chinese officials and the OWI in early 1943. On this list, a story-line about a female guerrilla leader was included:

Guerrilla training corps in Hengshan, Hunan. Training and operations over scattered areas. Mrs. Chao “Mother of the Guerrillas.” She is the moving spirit of 20,000 guerrillas who have been harassing the Japs along the Peiping-Hankow Railroad. She has a husband and four children. “Over 800,000 guerrillas are harassing Japanese garrisons and lines of communications.”¹¹⁶

The character Jade in *Dragon Seed*, in many ways, resembled Mrs. Chao—both were wives, mothers and, remarkably, Chinese female guerrillas against the Japanese. This development in the second script led both the OWI and Chang (who still came up with a list of objectionable sequences, mainly related to representations of the Chinese Nationalist government) to agree on the potential of the story as a major contribution to the Government’s War Information Program for its “inspiring presentation of the people of the fighting China.”¹¹⁷ OWI stressed that a story like this could demonstrate to all the fighting people of the United Nations that “we are all bound together by a unity which transcends differences in customs and languages, and it can give eloquent testimony that Americans believe in that unity.”¹¹⁸ The word “unity” had appeared several times in the OWI’s documents regarding the film, including script reviews, feature viewing comments and correspondence letters with MGM.¹¹⁹ Such repeated emphases on the resemblances and

¹¹⁶ “Proposed Themes for Pictures to be Made by Mission to China,” attachment of a letter from Earl Minderman to Lowell Mellett, 3 April 1943, box 1537, OWI files.

¹¹⁷ Script review of *Dragon Seed*, 11 August 1943, *Dragon Seed* file, OWI files.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Feature viewing of *Dragon Seed*, 25 May 1944, *Dragon Seed* file, OWI files; William S. Cunningham to Maurice Revnes, 13 July 1944, *Dragon Seed* file, OWI files.

compatibility between the Chinese and the Americans directly encouraged the emergence of the image of “white” Chinese in the final film of *Dragon Seed* and its publicity materials.

To Hollywood, portraying the Chinese as heroic allies was subverting generations of stereotypes in American popular culture of the Chinese as deceitful and corrupt inferiors. What complicated the issue even further in the war years was that film-makers needed to find a way to present the Chinese positively while distinguishing them from the Japanese enemy. Americans’ enduring prejudice against Asian people was more generically racial than national. According to John W. Dower, the yellow peril mythology “derived not from concern with any one country or people in particular, but from a vague and ominous sense of the vast, faceless, nameless yellow horde: the rising tide, indeed, of color.”¹²⁰ In the making of *Dragon Seed*, it is evident that MGM did not endeavour in visual terms to authenticate the Chinese characters – all the major roles were played by white actors and actresses. On the contrary, the studio made efforts to explain in their publicity materials why the Chinese should look similar to white Americans. In the pressbook of *Dragon Seed*, Hollywood star Katharine Hepburn, the actress who played the female protagonist in the film, was quoted as stating that she had been told by the director of *Dragon Seed*, Jack Conway, that “the Chinese are a truly democratic people, no different from ... Americans themselves” and they were “making the picture with an eye to the future” – something that hinting at the Federal government’s repeated emphasis on the importance of the Chinese Nationalist government on the world stage in the post-war years to come.¹²¹

In addition, the technical adviser of the film, Wei Hsueh, was also quoted in the pressbook as arguing that it was about time for MGM to clarify misunderstandings Americans had about the Chinese:

¹²⁰ John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), p. 156.

¹²¹ “Katharine the Unexpected,” MGM pressbook for *Dragon Seed*, BFI Reuben Library.

Chinese do not have slant eyes. It's the bone construction of the forehead and heavy eyelid that are responsible for the idea. Many Chinese, including General Chiang Kai Chek [sic], have large eyes, *similar* [my italics] to the Occidentals ... the restrictions on balloting apply to male and female alike ... Most colleges are co-educational, and a good percentage of the students at schools are girls. Women are not relegated to a back seat in domestic matters. They rule the roost almost as much as does the American variety of female ... The skin of Chinese women is a much finer texture than that of the Occidentals. It's milk *white* [my italics] in colour ... While most Chinese still adhere to ancestor worship, the ruling group is Christian.¹²²

Statements of this kind demonstrate how eager the film's producers were to liken the Chinese to Americans both physically and in matters of behaviour, which at least in part helped legitimate their all-white casting for the Chinese roles. More importantly, the "white" Chinese suggested to American audiences at the time that a "New China"—one akin to America itself—was emerging in the Far East.

Many film critics at the time picked up the important political messages that the film was trying to convey. Many saw *Dragon Seed* as an epic film while praising Katharine Hepburn for her characterisation as the modern Chinese woman, Jade. According to *The Hollywood Reporter*, for example, the film deserved to be ranked as one of the finest films Hollywood had ever produced: "it is not enough to say that in 'Dragon Seed,' MGM had done for China what it did for England two years ago in 'Mrs. Miniver,' for it has done much more than that."¹²³ *The Baltimore Sun* also claimed that the story of *Dragon Seed* was not only about one Chinese family "but of China itself, awakening from its traditional pacifism

¹²² "The Real China," MGM pressbook for *Dragon Seed*, BFI Reuben Library.

¹²³ "'Dragon Seed' Masterpiece of China and Its People: Producer, Directors and Cast Unite in Truly Great Picture," *The Hollywood Reporter* (17 July 1944). *Mrs. Miniver* (MGM, William Wyler, 1942), referred to in the review, was a successful earlier wartime film produced by MGM that had represented the US's other major wartime ally, Britain, as an idealistic society free of class issues.

and giving stubborn resistance to the evil enemy.”¹²⁴ *Dragon Seed*, according to trade magazine *Variety*, also promoted a broader internationalism: the film “undertakes to prove that the elder folk of the East and the younger races of the West not only may meet on human fundamentals, but that such kinship is inevitable in a shrinking world.”¹²⁵

Hepburn’s performance as Jade, the key character in the film, was discussed and applauded by many as a major point in her career. *The Hollywood Reporter* asserted that Hepburn gave “the finest performance of her career, one of the delicately sensitive understanding in which she submerges her own personality more completely than in any previous roles.”¹²⁶ *Variety* remarked that “Katharine Hepburn symbolizes the progressive younger Chinese element in its break with tradition, in its challenge of the elder customs in the home and the nation’s councils.”¹²⁷ Furthermore, *The Baltimore Sun* suggested that the that character Jade epitomised the “New China” itself:

Gentle in the opening scenes, timorously self-assertive—a daughter of New China coping with the hide-bound traditions of the old—she undergoes a basic change; becoming fierce, passionate and, on the surface, hard, as the war presses closer and closer. She, too, is able to kill—remorselessly and cruelly when the moment comes; she is a strong woman who knows what she is fighting for, and the worth of freedom and the measure of the Japanese menace.¹²⁸

All of these reviews praised the idea that a young and new China was breaking from the past by giving up all its traditions that were incompatible with America’s. Although a few reviewers, for example, P. P. K. and Eileen Creelman, criticised the film as not being

¹²⁴ Donald Kirkley, “‘Dragon Seed’ at Century,” *The Baltimore Sun* (12 August 1944).

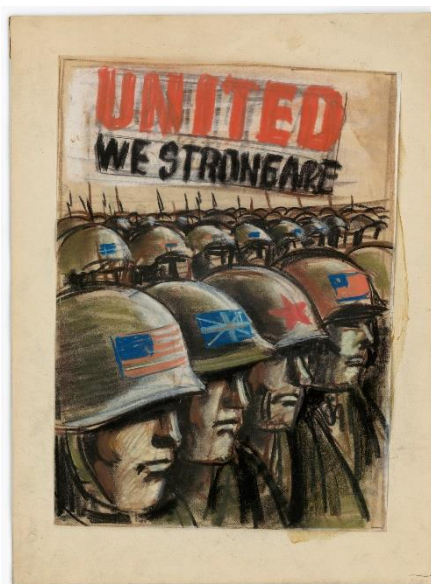
¹²⁵ “Dragon Seed,” *Variety* (daily) (17 July 1944).

¹²⁶ “‘Dragon Seed’ Masterpiece of China and Its People,” *The Hollywood Reporter*.

¹²⁷ “Dragon Seed,” *Variety* (daily) (17 July 1944).

¹²⁸ Kirkley, “‘Dragon Seed’ at Century.”

“Oriental enough to fool a child,” the OWI was itself satisfied with the representations of the “white” Chinese in *Dragon Seed*.¹²⁹ Making “Chinese” people more racially generalised had made them more relatable to Americans (or other nationals fighting the Axis powers)—suggesting that the “unity” which had been stressed in many of the OWI documents had been promoted in the film. Ultimately, the idea of minimising the “otherness” of the Chinese was also aligned with FDR’s proposed idea of “Four Policemen”—the Big Four who would be responsible for world peace after the end the war: the US, the UK, the Soviet Union, and China. In many wartime posters, the four nations were portrayed as confidantes and “comrades” with no obvious physical distinctions. These visual tropes (in films and print materials) emphasise the highly unrealistic American propaganda information about China in wartime—especially that relating to the Americanised “white” Chinese – an overall idealisation of Chinese people that was very unconvincing but at the same time so prevalent in wartime American mainstream medias.



¹²⁹ P. P. K. criticised the actors and actresses’ clumsy mimicry of Chinese accents in *Dragon Seed* in his review titled "'Dragon Seed,' Picturization Of the Pearl Buck Novel, With Katharine Hepburn, Walter Huston, Arrives At Music Hall," *The New York Times* (21 July 1944); Eileen Creelman, "Pearl Buck's Melodrama of China, 'Dragon Seed'," *New York Sun* (21 July 1944).

(Figure 5.7: “UNITED We Strong Are”)¹³⁰



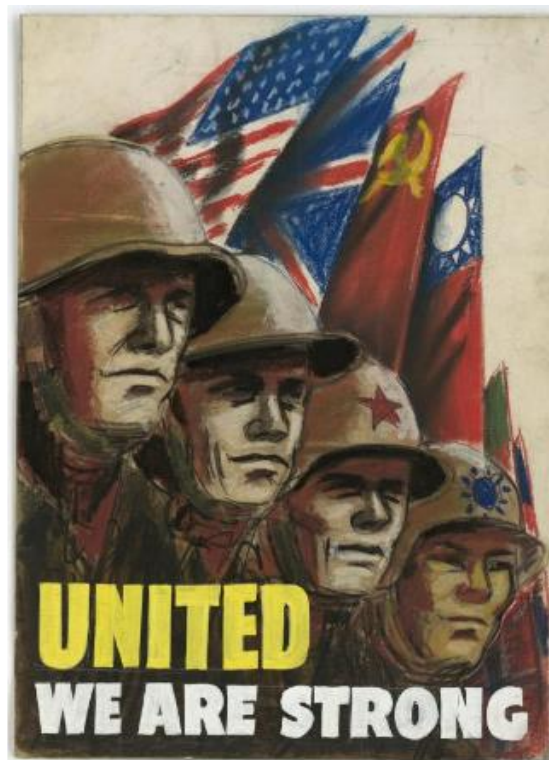
(Figure 5.8: “Four Soldiers”)¹³¹

¹³⁰ *United We Strong Are*, from Original Artwork for World War II Posters, 1942-1945, Record group 208, OWI posters, NAI: 7387521, National Archives, College Park, Maryland. Link: <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/7387521>

¹³¹ *Four Soldiers*, Original Artwork for World War II Posters, 1942-1945, Record group 208, OWI posters, NAI: 7387483, National Archives. Link: <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/7387483>



(Figure 5.9: “United We Will Win”)¹³²



¹³² *United We Will Win*, OWI poster NO. 64, Original Artwork for World War II Posters, 1942-1945, Record group 208, OWI posters, NAI: 7387525, National Archives. Link: <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/7387525>

(Figure 5.10: “United We Are Strong”)¹³³

Constructing Race in Wartime

While Americanising the Chinese in films to make them relatable not only to Americans but all the other western nationals fighting against the Axis powers, the Federal government also encouraged Hollywood to place emphasis on the “otherness” of the Japanese and, consequently, linked the “Asian-ness” of the Japanese to their unforgivable war crimes. Derogatory references to them as “Japs” and “Nips” flooded wartime articles or film reviews dealing with battles in the Pacific region. A government-distributed wartime pamphlet labelled “How to Spot a Jap” produced an elaborate and detailed comparisons of the physical differences between Chinese and Japanese. It commented that “the eyes of the Chinese are set like any European’s or American’s—but have a marked squint”, whereas the Japanese male “is afflicted with eyes slanted toward his nose.” Similarly, “[the Chinese person] usually has [an] evenly set of choppers — [the Japanese] has buck teeth.”¹³⁴ Another widely seen image titled “How to Tell Japs from the Chinese” was also published on *Life* magazine in 1941.¹³⁵

In line with the physical differences, government films also tended to illustrate the different behaviours and natures of Chinese and Japanese. Frank Capra’s *The Battle of China* (1944), one of the government’s propagandistic “Why We Fight” series, brought out the peaceful nature of Chinese culture while highlighting Japan’s Tanaka Plan—the aggressive

¹³³ *United We Are Strong*, Original Artwork for World War II Posters, 1942-1945, Record group 208, OWI posters, NAI: 7387514, National Archives. Link: <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/7387514>

¹³⁴ Karla Rae Fuller, “Creatures of Good and Evil: Caucasian Portrayals of the Chinese and Japanese during World War II”, in Daniel Bernardi, ed., *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 287.

¹³⁵ “How to Tell Japs from the Chinese”, *Life* (22 December 1941), p. 81. Link: https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=Y04EAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

ambition to conquer the world.¹³⁶ According to reviewer William Weaver, “[*The Battle of China*] tells with precision and power how war-mad Japan plotted the conquest of peace-loving China as the first and key phase of its Tanaka Plan for world domination.”¹³⁷

This kind of propaganda information inevitably disseminated a misleading message to the American public that people’s qualities were defined by or closely associated with their looks and the colour of their skin.¹³⁸ In *Dragon Seed*, for example, while all the major Chinese characters are played by Caucasian actors and actresses, many Japanese roles were played by Chinese/Asian actors. According to Karla Rae Fuller, unlike white actors and actresses impersonating Chinese people in other films about China who would often attempt to adopt pseudo-Chinese accents, the cast in *Dragon Seed* retained their original accents (“their different American ways of speaking”) in order “to delineate carefully ‘good’ Chinese from the ‘bad’ Japanese through their likeness to Caucasian Americans.”¹³⁹ The film reconstructed the image of China positively in the world of film – a fantasised realm, but also one in which existing racial prejudices and stereotypes (for example, the idea that Asians were innately inferior) were not challenged, but often reinforced.

¹³⁶ Frank Capra, Dir., *The Battle of China* (United States: War Activities Committee of the Motion Pictures Industry, 1944).

¹³⁷ William Weaver, “The Battle Of China,” *Motion Picture Herald* (20 May 1944).

¹³⁸ On wartime American efforts to demonise the Japanese, see John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy*, *passim*.

¹³⁹ Fuller, “Creatures of Good and Evil,” *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*, p. 291.

HOW TO SPOT A JAP



(Figure 5.11: "How to Spot a Jap")



(Figure 5.12: “How to Tell Japs from the Chinese”)¹⁴⁰

The 1945 RKO film *China Sky* exemplified the American racial prejudices underpinning the problematic representations of “white” Chinese vs. yellow “Japs,” while, at the same time, the Federal government and the American film industry were both engaged in intentional evasion of the existing racial problem in the United States during the wartime period of the early 1940s.¹⁴¹ *China Sky*, based on a story by Pearl S. Buck published in *Collier’s* magazine in 1942, was a typical Hollywood melodrama that essentially followed two love triangles with the war as the backcloth. The story begins with the introduction of an American doctor Sara Durand (Ruth Warrick) and her secret crush, Doctor Gary Thompson (Randolph Scott), who work together in a small hospital in a war-torn Chinese village. Unaware of Sara’s feeling about him, Gary gets married during a holiday and brings his new wife, Louise (Ellen Drew), back to the village with him. Louise cannot care less about the Chinese refugees, hates the endless bombings in the village, and becomes jealous of Sara for her closeness with Gary. At the same time in the hospital, a Chinese nurse Siu-Mei (Carol Thurston), who is engaged to an allegedly Korean doctor Kim (Philip Ahn), falls in love with another man—Chinese guerrilla leader Chen-Ta (Anthony Quinn). Siu-Mei’s affection for Chen-Ta is quickly understood by her fiancé Kim. Meanwhile, the two love triangles are shrewdly observed by an injured Japanese officer Yasuda (Richard Loo)—a captive who is being treated in the hospital. The cunning Japanese officer befriends and manipulates both Louise and Kim, having them unknowingly become quislings and deliver messages to the Japanese. These messages lead to an attack on the village by the Japanese army. Fortunately, Gary and the Chinese guerrillas fight side by side and manage to save the little village. At the

¹⁴⁰ “How to Tell Japs from the Chinese”, *Life* (22 December 1941), retrieved from Google Books:

https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=Y04EAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false

¹⁴¹ Ray Enright, dir., *China Sky* (RKO Pictures, 1945).

end of the film, both quislings—Louise and Kim—are killed by the Japanese, and their convenient deaths legitimate the two couples (Sarah and Gary; Siu-Mei and Chen-Ta), who all decide to devote themselves to fighting for China.

Many critics regarded the film as a clichéd American story that only happened to be set in China. For example, reviewer John T. McManus described it as just “another of those familiar, all-American love triangles. Working its points under a Jap-ridden Chinese subterfuge.”¹⁴² Otis J. Guernsey, Jr. also sarcastically commented that “Miss Buck had presumably attempted to drown the good earth castor oil in large quantities of California orange juice.”¹⁴³ Ironically, however, RKO had actually had a chance to produce a much more revolutionary film based on the first version of the script, but this had been turned down by both the PCA and the OWI for a range of reasons. As early as 1943, an outline of a story titled *China Sky* (then a totally different narrative) was sent respectively to the PCA and the OWI for script reviews. The story, as producer Emmet Lavery confidently described it, had the potential to make “a really fine picture which comes to grips with one of the greatest issues of the war and certainly one of the greatest issues of the peace,” meaning that the original idea for the film focused on controversial racial issues.¹⁴⁴ That initial script centred on a group of people from all over the world who meet up in war-torn China. The group includes an American girl, inspired by Madame Chiang’s speech, who has come to China to work for the Red Cross; an injured French major (an aviator); a Chinese female doctor; a black American lieutenant (also an aviator), who has been involved in the airplane crash which caused the French major’s injury; a Viennese engineer; a villainous Japanese colonel; a Buddhist monk; and a Chinese Catholic nun who is also a nurse. The small group retreats to a ruined monastery in the hills in order to escape the Japanese attack, and they begin to develop

¹⁴² John McManus, “Skirt Trouble in The East,” *New York PM* (25 May 1945).

¹⁴³ Otis Guernsey, ““China Sky””, *New York Herald Tribune* (25 May 1945).

¹⁴⁴ Emmet Lavery to Nelson Poynter, 17 June 1943, *China Sky* file, box 3513, OWI files.

friendships while trying to nurse the French major back to health.

During his recovery, the French major falls in love with the Chinese doctor—hence, a potential miscegenation—although everyone in the group accepts this interracial relationship as natural. Learning that the French major plans to live in the US after the war, however, the Chinese doctor refuses his proposal of marriage because she believes that American racial prejudice would eventually tear them apart. Her concern is later confirmed when the American girl reveals her revulsion over the blood transfusion she has received from the Chinese nun after a fatal injury during a Japanese strafing. The American girl, however, begins to change her outlook when she witnesses the Chinese doctor sacrifice her life to save a Japanese colonel who has information that she believes to be useful for her country. In the final sequence in which a plane finally arrives to rescue the group, the American girl gives up her seat (the last seat on the plane) so that the French major can take the Japanese colonel to Chungking—to accomplish what the Chinese doctor has died for.

In OWI's initial review of the first script of the film in June 1943, reviewers Dorothy Jones and Peg Fenwick expressed some interest in the story. They believed that, through the construction of the intelligent and independent Chinese female doctor, the “new and progressive China” was very well exemplified. The reviewers also believed that, through the presentation of racial issues in the story, “China is shown to be a democratic country in which distinctions of race and creed have little importance.”¹⁴⁵ From the domestic American angle, Jones and Fenwick claimed, this story could serve as a lesson teaching Americans better to understand their Chinese allies:

This story offers an unusual opportunity to make an important contribution to that understanding by presenting the Chinese people as they really are—an intelligent,

¹⁴⁵ Script review of *China Sky* by Dorothy Jones and Peg Fenwick, 22 June 1943, *China Sky* file, OWI files, p. 3.

heroic, civilized people whose culture far antedated our own ... Although there have been numerous films dealing with China, this is the first project submitted to this office which has potentialities for becoming America's tribute to China.¹⁴⁶

As much as the reviewers appreciated the story, however, they were concerned about its ruthless critique of American racial prejudice. A touchy theme like this, the reviewers were well aware, might also possibly "create more problems than it would solve." They noted that, by highlighting racial issues to this extent and acknowledging the fact that many Americans were racist, "[the story] might unwittingly implement Nazi and Japanese propaganda which has attempted to place the current struggle on a race basis".¹⁴⁷

OWI advised the producer to revise the story carefully in order to make it acceptable to all parties concerned. However, before the studio could attempt to change the script to the satisfactory of the OWI, the PCA also raised serious doubts concerning the racial issues presented. In a PCA memo regarding the script, Breen highlighted several plot devices which he believed to be controversial, including the presentation of the complete acceptance of an interracial marriage between a white person and a Chinese, and the portrayal of a black character as a potent and sympathetic figure who is also substantially important in the narrative.¹⁴⁸ Breen asserted that many dialogues and developments in the original script, "under the guise of entertainment" hid a pleading for "complete racial equality." "This is suggested," Breen reasoned, "by much of the action of the play and numerous lines of dialogue which seem to argue that all men are and should be completely equal in all things irrespective of origin, of race, color or religion or previous condition of servitude."¹⁴⁹ And

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 3-4.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ "J. I. B. proposes to discuss this problem over the telephone with Mr. Hays and then to discuss it informally and unofficially with the studio before definitely undertaking to raise the question of a possible policy matter involved", from "Memorandum re *China Sky* (RKO)," 9 November 1943, *China Sky* file, PCA files.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

such a plea, in his opinion, was challenging the PCA's current stance on American racial issues, evoking a deeper question of policy:

Shall the industry, as an industry, and by means of the approval of the Production Code Administration of a picture of this kind—which thus, at least implies the approval of the industry for which the PCA speaks—take upon itself the responsibility of seeming to endorse a thesis of this kind with its many ramifications and its highly provocative and controversial aspects?¹⁵⁰

Breen's personal opinion on the matter was that he did not want the agency to appear that it was in support of complete racial equality—a reluctance, as an industry, to counteract existing racial prejudices which, ironically, embodied exactly the same deep-rooted and institutional racism in US society as the story itself suggested.

After reviewing a slightly revised script, Jones and Fenwick changed their earlier favourable attitude toward the story, coming around to viewing it as a potential cause of major harm to the war effort. Though they did not deny what the story suggests to be true, the presentation of the US as a deeply racist country, they advised that such a representation “would serve to re-enforce existing prejudices rather than overcome them.”¹⁵¹ The reviewers believed that the script would give the Japanese ammunition to use against the US “since it convincingly demonstrates American racial prejudices.”¹⁵² These objections from the PCA and the OWI eventually sank the original story, which was later entirely abandoned and replaced by Buck's love triangles story—the film that was later produced. In this final story, nothing about prejudice in America is emphasised; there are only American and Chinese characters (but no European and African American characters or people from other religious

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Second script review of *China Sky* by Jones and Fenwick, 16 November 1943, *China Sky* file, OWI files.

¹⁵² Ibid.

groups) in the story; and all the main characters, appropriately and conveniently, fall in love with the “right” people who are from their own ethnic groups. *The Hollywood Reporter* criticised the screenplay for being “guilty of a somewhat condescending attitude to the Chinese and certainly should be called to answer for its slurring line to the effect that one of its characters, being white, is, therefore, the only logical object of a white woman’s affections.”¹⁵³ What critics and spectators did not know, of course, was that a relatively ground-breaking story about racial equality had originally been proposed but turned down by American regulatory agencies on the grounds that the institutional racism it portrayed was, after all, too difficult a topic to be used as the basis for a movie.

The finally-released film of *China Sky* incorporated many stereotypical contemporary representations of the Chinese. As a reviewer commented in the *New York Times*: “the Chinese characters are the typical, self-effacing types to be found on the screen and who probably would be looked upon as curios in Chungking.”¹⁵⁴ Most of them are shown as occupying ornamental roles of a kind seen in many earlier films of the 1920s and 30s. The war in the background becomes a matter incidental to the love triangles, and Chinese elements were largely used in the film and in its publicity materials simply to attract the attention of cinema-goers. For example, RKO’s pressbook for *China Sky* suggested the distributor promote war bonds by holding a “Miss China” beauty pageant before releasing the film and:

... On the opening night of the picture have all girls to appear on the stage dressed in native costume. A master of ceremonies should introduce each one to the audience,

¹⁵³ “RKO’s ‘China Sky’ Obvious; Lacking in Conviction: poor Yarn Hampers, Cast and Director,” *The Hollywood Reporter* (18 April 1945).

¹⁵⁴ T. M. P., “‘China Sky,’ Adapted From The Novel By Pearl Bucks, At The Palace, Has Been Made Into A Regulation Screen Drama,” *The New York Times* (25 May 1945).

the winner to be selected [from the] greatest applause. Give war bonds as prizes.¹⁵⁵

These “Chinese” women were intended merely as visual stimulations to attract moviegoers to the film and, consequently, to sell war bonds. *China Sky* did not cast genuine Chinese performers for the two crucial Chinese roles. Instead, it cast an Irish-American actress Carol Thurston as Siu-Mei and Mexican-American actor Anthony Quinn as Chen-Ta. The pressbook for *China Sky* defended its casting of these Chinese roles:

Of all the actors in Hollywood Anthony Quinn was the *logical* choice to play an Oriental role in *China Sky*. His style fitted him perfectly for the part of the guerrilla chief who falls in love with the Chinese nurse played by Carol “Three Martini” Thurston, herself equally clever for adapting herself to Oriental roles.¹⁵⁶

To cast real Chinese actors and actresses was not impractical at all in the 1940s. There were many Chinese-American or East Asian actors actively working in the movie industry during wartime, including Richard Loo, Philip Ahn, and Benson Fong. However, none of these real Asian performers was apparently good enough to become the “logical choices” like Anthony Quinn and Carol Thurston to play the important Chinese roles—the real Chinese actors, perhaps, were too “Asian” in appearance to appeal positively to American audiences. And since the enemy in the Pacific region—the Japanese—were also East Asians, filmmakers had to make efforts to distinguish the Chinese from the Japanese without confusing the audience. According to OWI’s script review of *China Sky* in 1944, a question had been raised about the presentation of Buddhism, the shared religion of many Chinese and Japanese, in the film. The OWI found it problematic that “both the Chinese and the Japanese

¹⁵⁵ “RKO Pressbook—*China Sky*,” 1945, RKO pressbook for *China Sky*, BFI Reuben Library.

¹⁵⁶ “RKO Pressbook—*China Sky*.”

were deeply religious and equally appealed to Buddha for vindication of their actions” with the nationals of both “calling on buddha as their god.”¹⁵⁷ As well as seemingly bringing out the supposed backwardness and superstition among the Chinese, the OWI reviews suggested that this presentation would heighten the connection between the two Asian nations while driving a wedge between China and the United States. No one, during the world war, wanted to raise these divisive issues in the interests of wartime unity. In the final film, therefore, all references to Buddhism were eliminated.

Moreover, while the sympathetic Chinese characters were all played by western performers—a way of “Americanising” the Chinese that had also been used in *Dragon Seed*—the two villains in the film were both played by Asian-American actors Richard Loo and Philip Ahn. It was not the first time Richard Loo, a Chinese American, had played evil Japanese officers in films about China. For example, he had been the vicious Japanese general Ito Mitsubi – who had captured eight American fliers and tortured them after the Doolittle Raid on Tokyo in April 1942 – in the film *The Purple Heart* (1944). Loo also played the Japanese ace pilot “Tokyo Joe” in the film *God Is My Co-pilot* (1945), Colonel Huraji in *China’s Little Devils* (1945) and Lieutenant-Commander Miyazaki in *Betrayal from the East* (1945), among other roles of this kind.¹⁵⁸ Reviewer Alton Cook once complimented Loo’s performances in such roles, claimed that “among the set of Chinese actors playing Jap roles, Richard Loo is outstanding in cunning and sadism.”¹⁵⁹

Korean-American actor Philip Ahn ended up following a similar path in his career. In *China Sky*, Dr. Kim (played by Ahn) is first introduced as a seemingly decent Korean man who has studied at a western university and works in the Chinese hospital. Being ashamed of

¹⁵⁷ Script review of *China Sky*, 7 August 1944, *China Sky* file, OWI files.

¹⁵⁸ Robert Florey, dir., *God Is My Co-Pilot* (Warner Bros, 1945).

¹⁵⁹ Alton Cook, “Purple Heart Acclaimed An Epic Of Jap Treachery,” *New York World-Telegram* (9 March 1944).

his half-Japanese heritage, Kim conceals it from everyone until it is discovered and used against him by Japanese officer Yasuda. From the moment that Kim's Japanese heritage is revealed, he turns to his "dark" side and all his "goodness" is shown as powerless to combat the insidious "Jap" instincts—he becomes insanely jealous of Chen-Ta and Gary, and he subsequently collaborates with the Japanese enemy. The portrayal of the character Kim conveys the message that all the Japanese are innately evil—a constant theme in American wartime propaganda materials. "A Jap's a Jap," famously concluded General John L. DeWitt, who strongly recommended the removal of Japanese Americans from the West Coast of the US after Pearl Harbor, "it makes no differences whether he is an American citizen or not ... There is no way to determine their loyalty."¹⁶⁰ Such distrust led directly to President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, which removed all people of Japanese descent from the Pacific Coast military zone.¹⁶¹ The Internment of Japanese Americans, to some extent, legitimated Hollywood's questionable casting choices because there were, indeed, simply not enough Japanese performers to play the "Jap" roles.

However, even when studios did have enough Asian performers to play both Chinese and Japanese characters, they still only cast Asians as villains while using occidentals to play the sympathetic Chinese—these Asian faces were rarely given the chance to play important roles unless it was as a sinister Japanese. In 1943, the War Department introduced an order against reporting depictions of the Japanese persecution of prisoners-of-war.¹⁶² Although the ban was later lifted in January 1944 when the Federal government released details about Japanese atrocities toward the prisoners in the Bataan Death March of 1942, in which tens of thousands

¹⁶⁰ John Morton Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p. 159.

¹⁶¹ "Japanese Relocation During World War II," National Archives (retrieved on 18 October 2017). Retrieved from: <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/japanese-relocation>

¹⁶² Script review of *Beast of the East* by D. B. Jones and Lilian R. Bergquist, 24 November 1943, *Beast of the East* file, box 3511, OWI files.

of Filipinos and Americans were forced by the Japanese to participate, the War Department still did not encourage film producers to show direct depictions of Japanese cruelty in commercial films.¹⁶³

So far as the government was concerned, atrocity pictures could undermine morale on the home front, evoke vigorous hatred of all Japanese Americans (including the loyal), and cause retaliation to American prisoners-of-war captured by the Imperial Japanese. This situation further escalated the existing tendency in the film industry to cast white people for Chinese roles and the Chinese for Japanese, as this visual distinction between the two Asian nationals – the “white” Chinese and the yellow “Japs” – was the easiest way to make wartime propaganda without showing too much of Japanese atrocities. The “improvements” of the image of the Chinese in American wartime films – by westernising and “whitening” them – therefore, were essentially made as a handy way to reflect wartime circumstances by exploiting the existing prejudice and racism toward the Chinese. This situation made the new “positive” image of Chinese people in American films particularly vulnerable even before the war ended.

The war years witnessed some self-contradictions in both Hollywood and the OWI in presenting Chinese people in American films. On the one hand, American film-makers and government officials believed it was their obligation to portray their Chinese allies positively in order to aid the war effort. On the other hand, as exemplified in the previous film analyses, institutional racism and the deep-rooted prejudices towards East Asians in mainstream society prevented the American film industry from presenting their Chinese allies in a genuinely positive and progressive way. The PCA files and OWI documents regarding the film *Keys of the Kingdom* (1944), featuring Hollywood newcomer Gregory Peck, captured this paradoxical status of the wartime film industry. They also reveal the push-back against the

¹⁶³ Chung, “Hollywood Diplomacy and *The Purple Heart* (1944).”

over-idealisation of the Chinese in American films.

Keys of the Kingdom (1944): Presenting a foreign mission in China during the war

Keys of the Kingdom was a film production by Twentieth-Century Fox, based on A. J. Cronin's 1941 novel with the same title.¹⁶⁴ The film opens in 1938, when Monsignor Sleeth (Sir Cedric Hardwicke) visits Father Francis Chisholm (Gregory Peck) in his parish in Scotland to ask him to retire because of his unorthodox teaching. In the evening, the Monsignor accidentally learns about Father Chisholm's life story by reading his diary. Chisholm had become an orphan at a very young age after his parents drowned in a river in Scotland while being chased by an anti-Catholic mob. Chisholm subsequently moved to his aunt's, whose daughter Nora he had fallen in love with while growing up. After leaving his aunt's family for theological seminary, however, Nora betrays him and then dies out of wedlock giving birth to another man's baby. The heartbroken young Chisholm decides to move as far away as possible, setting off for China to preach. In China, he at first encounters many obstacles, including lack of money for his mission and difficulties in keeping converts as they are used to being bribed with rice to be Christians by his predecessors. Things begin to improve after he meets a warm-hearted Chinese pilgrim Joseph (Benson Fong) and a respected local rich man Mr. Chia (Leonard Strong). With their help, the little mission in the distant village begins to grow.

Meanwhile, Father Chisholm has witnessed the transformation of China itself—the overthrow of the Imperial Qing dynasty and the advent of the Republic of China. During China's revolution, Chisholm even assists a Chinese Republican officer, Major Shen (Richard Loo), in defeating the Imperial troops and freeing the village he lives in. The rest of the story involves Bishop Anselm "Angus" Mealey (Vincent Price), who advises Chisholm to convert

¹⁶⁴ John M. Stahl, *The Keys of the Kingdom* (Twentieth-Century Fox, 1944).

rich Chinese men first as a trick to impress the poor, something which Chisholm refuses to do, and Reverend Mother Maria-Veronica (Rose Stradner), a nun sent to Chisholm's mission to help, who gradually becomes impressed by his dignity and admires him for his tenacity at the mission. Many years go by, Father Chisholm's mission has thrived, and the Chinese village has become peaceful and apparently blessed. Monsignor Sleeth is deeply touched by Father Chisholm's devotion after reading the diary and he decides to keep him working for his parish, as he wishes.

The book *Keys of the Kingdom* was published in 1941, four years after Cronin's previous success in the ground-breaking book *The Citadel*, which was later made into a popular film in 1938 by MGM. In 1941, MGM immediately expressed its interest in turning *Keys of the Kingdom* into a film. Only three months later, Twentieth-Century Fox, too, submitted the story's synopsis to the PCA for advice.¹⁶⁵ Breen replied to both studios with his three major concerns about the story—two of which were about the depictions of religions and ministers of religion, and the other one was the negative presentation of China as an undeveloped nation struggling with problems of warlords, famine, and epidemics.¹⁶⁶ As Hollywood's moral guide, the PCA mainly worried about the story's characterisations of religion and priests rather than the complications with the Chinese in wartime—the agency repeatedly advised the studios to consult the Catholic church concerning the depictions of religion in the film. Until mid-1942, in fact, Breen's discussion of the story with MGM was largely confined to religious sensitivities.¹⁶⁷ But he also anticipated vigorous protests from the Chinese government about the representations of plagues and bandits in China and, consequently,

¹⁶⁵ Al Block to Joseph I. Breen, 20 May 1941, *Keys of the Kingdom* file, PCA files.

¹⁶⁶ Joseph I. Breen to Louis B. Mayer, 22 May 1941, *Keys of the Kingdom* file, PCA files; Joseph Breen to Jason S. Joy, 27 August 1941, *Keys of the Kingdom* file, PCA files.

¹⁶⁷ Reverend Hugh Calkins to Breen, 11 July 1942; Breen to Calkins, 15 July 1942; Breen to Selznick, 15 July 1942; Selznick to Breen, 18 July 1942, *Keys of the Kingdom* file, PCA files.

suggested the studios would benefit from consulting consult T. K. Chang.¹⁶⁸ For some unknown reason, however, MGM pulled out of the project before the foundation of the OWI. In January 1943, after the BMP (under the OWI) had begun its close operation with Hollywood, the first script of *Keys of the Kingdom* was submitted to the agency for review by Twentieth-Century Fox. This script, however, was initially judged to be “detrimental rather than helpful to the war effort.”¹⁶⁹

The first thing that the OWI questioned in their script review was, in fact, the presentation of foreign missions in China. “We have just renounced extraterritorial rights in China,” the OWI reviewers asserted, “This story presents another kind of imperialism – religious imperialism – which is just as undesirable.”¹⁷⁰ The OWI believed that both the Catholic Church and the Methodist missionaries were presented unfavourably in the story, since they are shown “invad[ing] a foreign land, with the avowed purpose of forcing a way of thinking upon the people of that land.”¹⁷¹ Catholic missionaries, indeed, were portrayed in the story as taking advantage of Chinese people’s miserable living conditions, bribing them by offering rice and medical care in exchange for their souls. The Methodists, by contrast, were shown as prepared to splurge unlimited funds to convert Chinese “heathens,” an action which was considered equally problematic to those of the Catholics. The treatment of both Christian churches seemed to contradict freedom of worship, one of the “Four Freedoms” outlined by President Roosevelt in his speech of 6 January 1941.¹⁷²

In the OWI’s review of the revised script submitted on 11 January 1944, the reviewers further denounced the condescending view of the Chinese as being pathetic “heathens” who

¹⁶⁸ Joseph I. Breen to Louis B. Mayer, 22 May 1941; the PCA to Colonel Jason S. Joy, 27 August 1941, *Keys of the Kingdom* file, PCA files.

¹⁶⁹ Script review of *Keys of the Kingdom* by Dorothy B. Jones and Peg Fenwick, 6 January 1943, *Keys of the Kingdom* file, box 3520, OWI files.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

needed to be enlightened by American and English missionaries. The OWI criticised the story as ignoring the religious traditions of China, “whose culture and religious beliefs far ante-date [the Americans’] own and who would resent this emphasis on Christianity as the only possible religion for them.”¹⁷³ In its third review of the story, in February 1944, the OWI, once again, stressed Freedom of Worship. It also called attention to some derogatory religious references to the Chinese, such as calling them “God’s most unhappy creatures” and “the lowliest subjects of God’s kingdom.”¹⁷⁴ In general, the OWI opposed the story’s patronising view of China from a traditional missionary perspective and the depictions of the Chinese as heathens who must be shown the light. The agency’s repeating emphases on freedom of religion and its recognition of China’s own religious traditions (instead of calling them superstitions) challenged the legitimacy of the entire foreign mission in China, which had been perpetuated since the early nineteenth century. Such bold criticism would never have appeared in any of the reviews of the PCA, under the leadership of Joseph I. Breen, a prominent Catholic layman.

Intriguingly, while the OWI was criticising western missionary work in China as religious imperialism, the Chinese Nationalists were endeavouring to argue that the number of Christian converts in China was high, and that the Chinese were open-minded with respect to western culture and values. In a letter from Consul Chang to Breen, complaining about the story’s over-emphasis on the backwardness of the country and the narrow-mindedness of the people, Chang asserted that:

In our country, there are no less than 4,000,000 Catholics; through them, modern science was first introduced to China. History has it that several of our eminent

¹⁷³ Script review of *Keys of the Kingdom* by Jones and Fenwick, 19 January 1944, *Keys of the Kingdom* file, OWI files, p. 2.

¹⁷⁴ Script review of *Keys of the Kingdom* by Jones and Fenwick, 23 February 1944, *Keys of the Kingdom* file, OWI files, p. 2.

emperors and Prime Ministers were Catholics in religion and in action. The religious attitude of our people toward Christianity has never been such as described in the book.¹⁷⁵

The credibility of the statistic he provided aside, Mr. Chang had certainly forgotten about the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901)—a peasant uprising largely caused by the Chinese's antagonism against western imperialism and religious imperialism. However, it is fascinating to realise that both the Federal government and the Chinese Nationalists, from their own perspectives, were striving to construct a lovable and respectable image of Chinese people in American cinema during wartime. The US-China relation had been unprecedentedly strengthened because of the exigencies of the war.

Another aspect in the script that was found unacceptable by the OWI was the overall presentation of an “Old China” in the story. As mentioned in previous film analyses, both the OWI and Chinese officials at the time made huge efforts to reconstruct the image of Chinese people as modern, progressive, democratic, or even Christian, like the characters shown in *China*, *China's Little Devils*, and *Dragon Seed*. The presentations in the story of Chinese bandits, famines, superstitions, the conversion of Chinese heathens, and Chinese prejudices against white people (the very popular element seen in many 1930s films) had now, for obvious reasons, become obsolete and inappropriate during the war years. According to the OWI script review of *Keys of the Kingdom*:

China is today taking her place as one of the four great United Nations of the world. She is contributing immeasurably toward the defeat of our Japanese enemy, and is destined to play an important role in the peace to come. To portray the Chinese people as backward, superstitious, ignorant, cowardly and malicious is to insult one of our most important Allies in a manner which would be deeply resented by them as well

¹⁷⁵ T. K. Chang to Joseph I. Breen, 23 February 1944, *Keys of Kingdom* file, PCA files.

as by others of our Allies who hold the Chinese in high esteem.¹⁷⁶

After three script submissions by early 1944, the studio had eliminated Chinese bandits and Japanese villains and changed the climax of the story to a final battle between the Chinese Republic and the Chinese Imperial troops, which chronologically moved the storyline forward—“the picture now ends approximately in 1935,” years before the US and China had become allies in the World War II.¹⁷⁷

Like many other wartime motion pictures, extra care was taken in representing the Chinese in *Keys of the Kingdom*. However, it is noticeable in the OWI materials that the government’s years of encouraging the “idealising” of Chinese people in American films since 1942-43 had, by this point, begun to evoke some repugnance in the OWI itself. Randolph Sailor, an officer of the China Section, Far East Division of the OWI, at the end of March 1943 wrote to William Cunningham, Acting Chief of the Los Angeles Overseas Bureau, Motion Picture Division of the OWI, and warned him about over-idealisation of the Chinese in American wartime films:

We feel that the greatest danger lies in a reaction from an over-idealized and over-sentimentalized view that has been too current, and that more mere idealization would only widen the rift and encourage cynicism and a return to the old movie stereotypes that were equally misleading. The true picture of China is by no mean all white or all black, and the problem is to keep it from seeming so against the general movie tendency to go all out on one side or the other.¹⁷⁸

In a follow-up letter in April, Sailor stressed again that “sentimentalism over China is

¹⁷⁶ Script review of *Keys of the Kingdom* by Jones and Fenwick, 19 January 1944, *Keys of the Kingdom* file, OWI files, pp. 1-2.

¹⁷⁷ William S. Cunningham to Randolph Sailor, 13 April 1944, *The Keys of Kingdom* file, OWI files.

¹⁷⁸ Randolph Sailor to Cunningham, 31 March 1944, *Keys of the Kingdom* file, OWI files.

dangerous to her, as many intelligent Chinese see clearly.”¹⁷⁹ Sailor was not alone in his concern about the American public’s cynicism over, or even resentment towards, the over-romanticised image of the Chinese emerging in American films since 1943. George Taylor, Assistant Deputy Director of the Far East Division, also suggested Cunningham not object to a line in the script in which a Chinese calls the Americans “foreign devils.” As Taylor explained, “it may not always be too bad a thing to indicate that all the looking down is not on the American end.”¹⁸⁰ With these voices against over-idealisation of the Chinese in films, the rest of censorship activity surrounding *The Keys of the Kingdom* began to soften. The completed picture was later reviewed by Cunningham himself and another OWI reviewer, and it was granted a permit for overseas release. The remaining derogatory remarks about the Chinese—including “Chinese laundrymen” and description of the village as an “abandoned outpost of humanity” in “darkest China”—were legitimated in the feature viewing comments as necessary for the development of the story. However, the OWI nevertheless suggested the studio remove these references from sub-titles and dubbings to reduce potential objections in overseas markets.¹⁸¹

The Keys of the Kingdom was a successful film after all—it was nominated for four Oscar awards in 1945.¹⁸² It was also a unique picture compared to other wartime films about China – it essentially tells a story about the “Old China” from a rather traditional missionary perspective, during a period in which the main theme of the Federal government’s propaganda about China was promoting the notion of a “New China” with modern citizens. The early OWI script reviews of *The Keys of the Kingdom* reveal the agency’s continuing

¹⁷⁹ Sailor to Cunningham, 19 April 1944, *Keys of the Kingdom* file, OWI files.

¹⁸⁰ George E. Taylor to Cunningham, 10 April 1944, *Keys of the Kingdom* file, OWI files.

¹⁸¹ Feature review of *Keys of the Kingdom* by Cunningham and Virginia Richardson, 11 December 1944, *Keys of Kingdom* file, OWI files.

¹⁸² *The Keys of the Kingdom* was nominated for the Best Actor (Gregory Peck), the Best Art Direction, Cinematography, and Scoring. See: <http://awardsdatabase.oscars.org/search/results>

efforts to idealise Chinese people even at the expense of questioning the legitimacy of foreign missions in China as a whole. At the same time, however, the internal correspondence between OWI officers in 1944 indicated the appearance of a new aversion to the over-idealisation of Chinese people in American wartime films. These contradictory attitudes toward filmic representations of China within the OWI helped underline the unreliability of the Federal government's wartime propaganda information and, perhaps, also hinted that the nature of these wartime images of China were at bottom unconvincing and in essence shaky fabrications ready to be subverted at any point when the political situation in China changed.

Conclusion

Hollywood has a long history of representing China and Chinese people in certain creative, even fantastical ways. Traced back to their origins, as mentioned in the introduction, these images were essentially derived from two western impressions of China – the one described by Marco Polo and the perception of Genghis Khan's invading army. From the mid-nineteenth century, when an increasing number of Chinese immigrants began to enter the United States looking for jobs in the mining and construction industries and consequently competing with lower-class white workers in the labour market, derogatory representations of Chinese people began to proliferate in American popular culture (in folk songs, poetry, caricatures, and literature). The Chinese were increasingly represented as dishonest and unfathomable cheap foreign labour, with the stereotypical "John Chinaman" becoming a widely-known personification. Such images developed further in the 1870s as widespread popular anti-Chinese sentiment in the US emerged. This coincided with the economic Depression of the time, during which Chinese immigration was blamed by some labour organisations (e.g., the Workingmen's Party, led by Denis Kearney, who campaigned on the slogan "The Chinese Must Go") for the high unemployment rate in the United States. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, introduced in the following decade, helped intensify the marginalised cultural and socio-economic status of Chinese immigrants in the United States. This vicious circle resulted in a continuing increase in negative cultural constructions of China and the Chinese in American popular culture.

By the end of the nineteenth century, a male Chinese stereotype had also been created in the theatrical world: he was a deceitful and wily Chinese laundryman, with a comic appearance, incapable of speaking proper English, and impersonated by white actors. This image of Chinese men being unassimilable servants and laundrymen was originally derived

from Bret Harte's famous poem *The Heathen Chinee* (1870), and it remained in American popular culture for decades after its creation. Chapter one of this thesis analysed many American folk songs, poems, cartoons by a range of artists (with different political stances), articles and plays produced in the 1850s to 1890s period to demonstrate the roots of certain Chinese stereotypes that would long persist. These cultural constructions of Chinese people, created before Hollywood (in the sense of an organised American film industry) existed, provided archetypes for the cinematic representations of the Chinese in the following century.

Chinese characters introduced into American cinema during the 1910s and 20s included Cheng Huan in *Broken Blossoms* (1919), Yen Sin in *Shadows* (1922), Lotus Flower in *The Toll of the Sea* (1922), and the Manchurian father in *Mr. Wu* (1927). Chapter two analysed the connections between such early filmic representations of Chinese people and social and cultural stereotypes created earlier. It also investigated a series of other factors that had shaped the early cinematic representations of Chinese people, including the trend for collecting Chinese art in America during the 1910s and 1920s, China's weak and victimised position on the world stage at this time, and the real social struggles faced by Chinese immigrants and their descendants in America in the first three decades of the twentieth century. The latter included the limited occupational choices for Chinese men, the unbalanced gender ratio of Chinese immigration (reflected by the often-absent Chinese female characters in early films and the one-dimensional image of Chinese women when they did appear), and the US's China policies at the time (the uneasy co-existence of the "Open Door" Policy abroad and the Chinese Exclusion Act at home). The films analysed in this chapter were discussed in relation to such factors. It also outlined the most basic gender stereotypes of Chinese people presented in such movies – the feminised Chinese men and the sexualised Chinese women. Since such early American stereotypes of China and the Chinese were deeply engrained productions of history, culture, and politics, they became difficult to

challenge.

In 1930, after years of criticism of movie content by organisations such as Protestant Minister William H. Short's Motion Picture Research Council (MPRC) and growing fears of censorship by the Federal government, the MPPDA adopted the Production Code (often known as the Hays Code after long-time MPPDA president Will H. Hays), a set of moral guidelines that expanded greatly upon the "Don'ts and Be Carefuls" of 1927. Amongst a range of strictures of varying kinds, the new Code laid down that "The just rights, history, and feelings of any nation are entitled to consideration and respectful treatment" and insisted that "The history, institutions, prominent people and citizenry of other nations shall be represented fairly."¹

The Great Depression of the 1930s, however, affected most American businesses, including the film industry. During the 1920s, the studios had borrowed money to pay for both the transition to sound films and the acquisition of chains of movie theatres, making them very vulnerable when the Depression struck.² Studios and exhibitors consequently responded to the coming of hard times by trying to encourage as many people as possible to carry on going to the movies. This involved using every means they could think of, including exotic and/or revealing film content and interesting non-filmic activities that movie-goers could participate in at theatres. The movie industry's money-making instincts additionally encouraged the emergence of a series of films, produced between 1930 and 1934, the so-called Pre-Code era, that included some of the boldest American fantasies so far about China and the Chinese people. Such films included *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932), *Shanghai Express* (1932) and *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933).

This thesis has argued that these motion pictures, which contradicted the Production

¹ Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, Appendix 2, p. 364.

² Bergman, *We're in the Money*, pp. xxi-xxii.

Code to a considerable degree, were of major significance in the history of how Hollywood represented China and its people. *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, for example, depicted Fu Manchu (Boris Karloff), for the first time, as a blind racist hostile to the entire white race without suggesting the cause of his prejudice (unlike the previous movies starring Warner Oland, which explained Fu Manchu's hatred as a revenge for the murder of his wife and child by a British soldier). The film also audaciously presented a Chinese woman, Fu Manchu's daughter Fah Lo See (Maryna Loy), as a hypersexual character who sexually exploits a white man in the film.

Josef von Sternberg's *Shanghai Express*, as noted by many film historians, had a major effect in shaping American film-makers' construction of China. His visual representation of a fantastical China (with "Peking" station largely based on crowded Chinatown marketplaces in the US) helped make express trains and bandits/warlords into popular visual elements to be shown in American films about China from the 1930s onward. Although the director himself confessed later that the Shanghai he presented in *Shanghai Express* was a pure fantasy, which was nothing like the real China he experienced during his later visit to the country, it did not hinder other film-makers from trying to mimic his version of China in their own productions. A huge box-office success, *Shanghai Express* brought in 3.7 million dollars at the nadir of the Great Depression. As a consequence, a good number of films with titles including the words "Shanghai" or "Express" proliferated in American cinema in the following decades. In China, however, the film infuriated the Chinese government – all Paramount productions were banned in the country for the first time, which required American diplomatic intervention to lift the ban. The film was a special episode in Hollywood history as it spoke to and reinforced popular American stereotypes of China. It also underscored the severe cultural barriers and conflict of economic interest between Hollywood and China in the early 1930s.

This thesis has also argued that a new "warlord cycle" began after the release of

Shanghai Express in 1932. The reasons for the appearance of this cycle, it is suggested, were rooted in both studios' wishing to duplicate the financial success of *Shanghai Express* and the increasingly prevalent criticism during the Depression years of American "Robber Barons," who shared many attributes with the often wealthy but cruel Chinese warlords. *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, another warlord film, presented its audience with an unusual gendered and racial relationship between a Chinese warlord and a white missionary, showing a white woman – the captive of the warlord – being sexually attracted to her captor. The relatively poor reception of this film ultimately suggests perhaps that American audiences in the early 1930s were unconvinced by miscegenation of this kind – Chinese men, at this time, being perceived for the most part as undesirable aliens.

In 1934, with a growing crescendo of criticism of movie content in the first published volumes of the academic Payne Fund Studies (8 volumes, 1933-35) – initiated by Short's MPRC – and from the newly-organised Catholic Legion of Decency, the MPPDA created the Production Code Administration to enforce the Production Code and appointed prominent Catholic layman Joseph I. Breen to head the agency. After the foundation of the PCA, suggestions on how to present China and Chinese people in American film began to be provided systematically by the Breen office to Hollywood studios. The early years of the 1930s also saw efforts made by the Chinese Nationalist government to influence Hollywood's constructions of China. At the beginning of the decade, the Chinese government seems to have begun to appreciate the pre-eminent influence of American films in the world. It concluded it was necessary to reconstruct the representations of China and the Chinese people by Hollywood in order to improve the image of their country on the world stage. The National Board of Film Censors (NBFC) was created by Chiang Kai-shek in 1931 to oversee both domestic and international films. Chinese consuls were subsequently sent to Los Angeles to co-ordinate with both Hollywood studios and the PCA for the purpose of

influencing filmic constructions of China and the Chinese people in American cinema.

According to Hye Seung Chung's recent book *Hollywood Diplomacy*, the Chinese Nationalist government agencies (such as the NBFC and the Central Motion Picture Censorship Committee [CMPCC]) had gained the Chinese consuls some negotiating power in Hollywood – a power only diminished later by the dissolution of the CMPCC in 1938. This thesis has analysed an extensive volume of PCA materials concerning Hollywood films about China (including correspondences between Breen and Chinese consuls Kiang and Chang, together with PCA script reviews sent to studios) and reaches different conclusions from Chung. It is argued here that, although the PCA and the studios made efforts to placate the Chinese consuls in many cases during the 1930s, they did not make genuine efforts to challenge the stereotypical representations of Chinese people in motion pictures. Most of the appeasement studios offered to the Chinese consuls was essentially damage control: futile retrospective apologies and promises to do better after certain films deemed offensive had already been released.

An example for this is the making of the film *Barricade* (1939). Two successive Chinese consuls (Yi-Seng Kiang and T. K. Chang) had protested against the film to two studios (RKO in 1936, when the film was first proposed, and Twentieth-Century Fox in 1938, when it was finally produced) and the PCA, but no one in the industry had listened to their objections, even though the Chinese CMPCC was still backing them at the time. In addition, it is also evident from Breen's own letters that he personally found most foreign consuls unreasonable and impossible to work with, and only made efforts to conciliate them for the sake of preserving international revenues. As a consequence of the industry's only half-hearted placation of foreign consuls, studios always found ways to circumvent Chinese officials' objections and suggestions, while persisting in portraying China and the Chinese people in the ways they wanted to throughout the 1930s until 1941.

Successful and popular films about the Chinese produced in this period include *The General Died at Dawn* (1936), *The Good Earth* (1937), *Lost Horizon* (1937), and *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941). *The General Died at Dawn* continued the “warlord cycle,” depicting the Chinese as incomprehensible aliens who remained forever a mystery to westerners. Frank Capra’s Oscar-winning film *Lost Horizon* introduced Shangri-La, the ultimate utopia, to Depression-torn American movie-goers, reinforcing their fanciful imaginations about the Orient. *The Good Earth*, on the other hand, was considered a milestone in Hollywood’s history of representing China and Chinese people. Based on Pearl S. Buck’s award-winning novel, it involved three years of collaboration between MGM and the Chinese government. Both sides had made major compromises and both were finally satisfied. Although many modern scholars have criticised the film for its inappropriate lines, unfair casting, and yellow-face make-overs, it is argued in this thesis that the film was a huge step forward. *The Good Earth* was the first Hollywood production that treated the Chinese as equal and ordinary people. According to many original reviews, film critics marvelled at how relatable the Chinese characters (and their struggles) were to themselves. Such admiration of a Chinese-character-only story had never been achieved ever before.

However, *The Good Earth* was one-of-a kind for its time. The other films produced in the same period still present China consistently – and in spite of the Chinese consuls’ persistent lobbying of the PCA and the studios to change their outlook – as fantastical, uncanny, and timeless. Chapter three discussed Josef von Sternberg’s Pre-Code film *Shanghai Express* and chapter four ended with his *The Shanghai Gesture*, both of them films foregrounding Shanghai as a fanciful location where anything and everything can happen. Analysis of these films suggests that the image of China and its people remained remarkably constant in American cinema throughout the decade until the US entered World War II, when the Federal Government intervened in Hollywood and mobilised commercial films for propaganda

purposes.

Once the US entered the Second World War, the PCA's influence over the industry was supplemented – and to some extent replaced – by a new Federal government agency, the Office of War Information (OWI). Although the PCA still oversaw issues to do with morality in films, war propaganda information became increasingly prioritised in film production rather than traditional, conventional moral concerns. Since the OWI's opinions represented what the authorities (the Roosevelt Administration and Chinese diplomats) considered necessary and proper, and the new agency itself had influence over releasing film export licences as it carried weight with the Office of Censorship, Hollywood studios often complied with the OWI's suggestions for their pictures. Many OWI files have been analysed for this thesis, and it is evident that the cinematic images of the US's allies and enemies were consciously manipulated by the agency to influence the American general public and ultimately to mobilise American citizens' support for the Federal Government's policies during wartime. Many films that were approved by the PCA in the 1930s, including *The General Died at Dawn*, *The Good Earth*, and *Barricade*, had now become problematic to the OWI for their inappropriate representations of China and the Chinese. According to the OWI records, all three were disapproved for recirculation for their derogatory portrayals of the Chinese people.

In addition, a new series of sympathetic wartime Chinese characters was introduced by Hollywood under pressure from the US government. These representations, it is argued in this thesis, though significantly different from the stereotypes of Chinese people prevailing in 1930s American cinema, were still at heart an American fantasy about China. To present the Chinese in a favourable light, the OWI encouraged studios (in their reviews of scripts and films) to portray China as an ancient Oriental country that was (supposedly) becoming more and more akin to the United States itself – a “New China” in formation under the direct

influence of the US. Following the government's guidance, Hollywood presented many Chinese characters – for example, in *China* (1943), *Dragon Seed* (1944), *China's Little Devils* (1945), and *China Sky* (1945) – as modern young Chinese who were utterly different from the Japanese enemies both physically and in matters of behaviour. In these wartime films, the Chinese characters were often played by Occidental actors and actresses or by Chinese performers with highly westernised/Americanised appearances; the Japanese characters, on the other hand, were mainly played by Asian (especially Chinese) performers, with their “Asian-ness” being highlighted by their looks and ways of speech. Such emphasis on physical differences between the “white” Chinese and yellow “Japs” (to distinguish the “good” Chinese from the “bad” Japanese) was in essence a continuation of the existing racial prejudices toward East Asian people in American society.

The history of the making of *China Sky*, in which the PCA opposed the originally-proposed story's promotion of total racial equality, and the OWI disapproved of that story's criticism of American racism, suggested the difficulties involved in challenging institutional racism in the United States at this time. In addition, the OWI file for the film *The Keys of the Kingdom* reveals an interesting paradox in presenting the US's Chinese allies during wartime. On the one hand, the agency urged film-makers to subvert the image of Chinese people as uncivilised heathens even at the expense of questioning the entire Christian foreign mission as religious imperialism. On the other hand, some OWI officers began to express their aversion to the over-idealisation of Chinese people in American wartime films and urged the need for something more “real” because, they claimed, sentimentalism over China had gradually become tiresome and unconvincing to some American cinema-goers. These contradictory attitudes within the OWI emphasise even further that the wartime representations of the Chinese in Hollywood films were produced only to serve the Federal Government's propaganda needs under the exigencies of the war and for the then

“foreseeable” future. They would not survive the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 by the Chinese Communist Party led by Mao Zedong.

American fantasies about China had begun before motion pictures appeared. These fantasies made their way from literature, caricatures and plays into cinema in the early years of the twentieth century, and they persisted in the film world. This thesis has analysed Hollywood’s construction of China and the Chinese in American film only up to 1949 and is particularly focused on the influence of two major agencies – the PCA and the OWI – in such constructions. It is hoped it has laid the foundation for further research by scholars (including myself) to pursue in the future. A possible research question developing from this thesis is simply “what happened after 1949?” With the foundation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and the beginning of the diplomatic estrangement between the US and China, the images of a “New China” and modern Chinese people created in the war years disappeared almost instantly in American cinema. Many American films about China produced in the 1950s and 60s presented Communist China as a dangerous locale, including movies such as *Soldier of Fortune* (1955), *Blood Alley* (1955), *Satan Never Sleeps* (1963), and *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962). It would be useful and interesting to compare and contrast the sudden change between the wartime heroic China in American films analysed in this thesis and the dangerous Communist China depicted in Cold War films.

One source for such a study looking at the influences that went into the production and making of such films would be the files of the PCA, which survived (at least nominally by the mid-1960s) until replaced by the new ratings system in 1968. Although the OWI dissolved after the end of the war, other organisations (for example, the House Committee on Un-American Activities [HUAC]) brought influences, both direct and indirect, to bear on the cultural constructions of China and the Chinese in Cold War America. Edward Dmytryk, for

example, one of the “Hollywood Ten” who defied HUAC in 1947 and was later jailed for contempt of Congress, subsequently testified and “named names” to HUAC. After resuming work in Hollywood in 1951, he directed two films about China. *The Left Hand of God* (1955), set in 1947, tells the story of a Catholic mission in China against the background of the Chinese Civil War (between Chinese Communists and the Nationalists), warlords and revolution. *Soldier of Fortune* (1955), on the other hand, was set in the 1950s and deals with the rescue of an American journalist in Communist China.³ It would be possible to analyse the development of Hollywood’s later Cold War view of Communist China through research in PCA, HUAC, and studio archives. Pressbooks and reception materials would additionally be valuable sources in studying Americans’ changing perceptions of China during the Cold War era. It would also be worthwhile to analyse the influence of Henry Luce’s magazine empire in shaping the images of China in American mainstream media, including movies.

Another possible research topic is the representation of Chinese race and gender during the Cold War. This thesis has explored the American representation of Chinese femininity and masculinity, including discussion of gender stereotypes such as “Lotus Flowers”, “Dragon Ladies”, the feminised Chinese laundrymen, and sexual-predator-type warlords. During the post-1949 period, further interesting gender issues were raised in American commercial films. There were more films foregrounding Chinese women as white men’s romantic interest with political complications forming a backdrop, as in *Love is a Many-Splendored Thing* (1955), *China Doll* (1958), *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), and *The Mountain Road* (1960). At the same time, Chinese men were often only shown in unsympathetic light as conspirators or Communist spies. These discriminatory treatments of Chinese males and females were, in essence, continuations of the deep-rooted prejudice against Chinese men and the “Lotus

³ Edward Dmytryk, *The Left Hand of God* (Twentieth-Century Fox, 1955); Dmytryk, *Soldier of Fortune* (Twentieth-Century Fox, 1955).

Flower” fixation when representing East Asian women. However, the increasing acceptance of Chinese-born women (both as film characters and actresses) in American cinema during the Cold War period (e.g., Li li-hua in *China Doll*, Lisa Lu in *The Mountain Road* and Nancy Kwan in *The World of Suzie Wong*, all of who played sympathetic roles in these films) deserves a deeper exploration.⁴ Factors that may have shaped the racial and gendered representation of Chinese people in American cinema during the Cold War era include, for example, some American publications’ coverage of Chinese men being overpowered by Chinese women in Communist China, changes in American policies (such as the end of National Origins quota system by the Immigration Act of 1965), and China-produced self-promoting propaganda programmes to the West (e.g. an English-version documentary series titled *China Today* that was produced from the early 1950s to 1964).⁵ The PCA’s comments and suggestions for Cold War films about China would also be a useful source for study, as the PCA itself evolved to some extent over the post-war years and began to decline in the 1960s. As PCA files for *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) and *The Sand Pebbles* (1966) make plain, the attention the agency had paid (however limited) in the 1930s and 40s to avoid offending Chinese nationals and China as a country had completely disappeared by the 1960s.

⁴ Li li-hua had been born in Shanghai, Lisa Lu in Beijing and Nancy Kwan in the British protectorate of Hong Kong.

⁵ Yeh, “Images of Equality and Freedom,” p. 510; *Socialism on Film: The Cold War and International Propaganda* collection, sourced from the archives of the British Film Institute (BFI), Adam Matthew Digital.

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