

The Asian American Cinema Movement: Fighting for Representation

Professor

Rob Buscher buscherr@sas.upenn.edu

Course Description

Providing a broad introduction to the history of persons of Asian descent living in the United States, this course will specifically examine the Asian American & Pacific Islander American experience as told through the cinematic lens. Equal parts socio-political history and media studies, this course will comprehensively assess factors contributing to the historical under representation of AAPIs in mainstream American media. By contrast, the media texts that we study will reveal a cinematic history that runs parallel to the mainstream, consisting of independently produced films created by and/or starring AAPIs that feature authentic portrayals of the community they represent.

Topics will include economics of film production, broadcast television ratings, film festivals as a mechanism of distribution, negative stereotyping, Hollywood whitewashing, cultural appropriation, and media activism.

The course will be offered in-person this semester, but may be subject to change based on evolving COVID-19 situation. This syllabus will be updated to reflect hybrid/online learning, if necessary, as the semester proceeds.

The course will take place once a week and will consist of lecture, facilitated discussion, and screening of film clips relating to the current week's topic.

Additional out of class assignments will be given that involve participation in the virtual programs being offered by the Philadelphia Asian American Film Festival, tentatively scheduled November 3-13, 2022. Students will have the opportunity to engage with and learn from AAPI filmmakers remotely through the online festival programs, which will be available to participate in at no cost to students in this course.

Assessment

There will be two research papers, and a reflection journal.

All sources must be properly cited. See syllabus for submission deadlines.

Paper 1 2,500 words	25%
Paper 2 2,500 words	25%
Reflection Journal 3,000-4,000 words	40%
Participation	10%

Attendance Policy

Typically, when this course is held in person, students are permitted **no more than 2 absences**. Given the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic however, additional allowances will be made if there is a valid medical reason for missing additional class sessions.

Office Hours

Available by request only, remotely via Zoom.

Readings and lecture content are subject to change

Week 1 Aug 31- Prologues to Cinema: Literary Orientalism and Yellowface Theater

Serving as a broad introduction to the course and overview of topics to be explored in the curriculum, this week will frame the discussion of representation within the larger context of European Imperialism and the colonization of Asia. Topics will include the Edward Said's Orientalism and Werner Faulstich's writings on "the Other" in Hollywood. Students will also be led through a series of icebreakers encouraging them to think critically about their own identities as they pertain to ethnicity.

Readings:

Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People

Helen Zia, Introduction & Chapter 1 - From Nothing, a Consciousness

A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America

Ronald Takaki, Strangers from a Different Shore & Pioneers from Asia

Orientalism

Edward Said, Preface & Introduction

Week 2 Sept 7 - Villains & Detectives: Chinese American Representations in Early Hollywood

This lecture will introduce Sax Rohmer's Dr. Fu Manchu series and other anti-Chinese characters in early 20th century literature, further examining how these set a foundation for anti-Asian stereotypes. We will also discuss how the practice of yellowface within stage productions in the US and UK led to popular white actors like Warner Oland, Boris Karloff, and Sidney Toler playing Asian roles in early Hollywood films.

Readings:

A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America

Ronald Takaki, "Caught in Between": Chinese Born in America

Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance

Krystyn R. Moon, Introduction & Imagining China: Early Nineteenth-Century Writings and Musicals

The Insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu

Sax Rohmer

Week 3 Sept 14 - Asian Immigrants in Early Hollywood

Sessue Hayakawa and Anna May Wong were both major stars in the silent and early talkie eras respectively. Using Hayakawa's meteoric rise to fame we will examine the institutional racism that prevented him from achieving long lasting recognition that ultimately encouraged him to leave Hollywood. Similarly, Wong serves as a case study in how women in general were portrayed in early Hollywood, and her typecast roles established a number of negative stereotypes that still haunt Asian American women today. Other topics will include early Japanese immigration and the rise in anti-Japanese sentiment of the 1920s that led in part to the Immigration Act of 1924. We will also examine the later career of Indian immigrant Sabu Dastagir, whose starring roles in Hollywood and mainstream British cinema took place at the height of Orientalism and changing perspectives on classification of race during the late period of the British Raj.

Readings:

Asian American Dreams

Helen Zia, Chapter 5 - Gangsters, Gooks, Geishas, and Geeks

Screening Asian Americans

Eugene Franklin Wong, The Early Years: Asians in the American Films Prior to World War II

“Asian Detectives in 1930s Hollywood” Brian Camp

(<https://briandanacamp.wordpress.com/2016/11/01/asian-detectives-in-1930s-hollywood/>)

Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction

Gina Marchetti, Introduction & Chapter 1 - The Rape Fantasy

Jungle Boys, Babus and Camp Orientals The Liminal Personae of the Film Star Sabu

Jyoti Argadé, White to Some, Brown to Others: “Passing” for American and the Malleability of Whiteness

“How Star-studded Western Films Justified British Colonialism”

The Indian Express (<http://indianexpress.com/article/research/1930s-imperial-propaganda-how-star-studded-western-films-justified-british-colonialism-4783908/>)

Week 4 Sept 21 - WWII and the Propaganda Machine

This lecture will provide an in-depth analysis of US-Japan relations from late 19th century through WWII in an effort to contextualize Executive Order 9066, which led to the mass incarceration of 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry in the United States. We will discuss how anti-Japanese Propaganda left a permanent impact on the portrayals of Asian Americans in cinema and popular media. The lecture will also examine the intergenerational trauma that exists within the Japanese American community citing examples from the lecturer's personal family history.

Readings:

Buddha in the Attic

Julie Otsuka, *Traitors & Last Day*

“A Psychohistorical Analysis of the Japanese American Internment”

Human Rights Quarterly, Alison Dundes Renteln

“WWII Propaganda: The Influence of Racism”

Hannah Miles

(<https://artifactsjournal.missouri.edu/2012/03/wwii-propaganda-the-influence-of-racism/>)

Executive Order 9066 (<http://www.pbs.org/childofcamp/history/eo9066.html>)

Film: ***Know Your Enemy: Japan*** (1945) dir. Frank Capra | 62 mins

Week 5 Sept 28 – Yellow Power and Asian American Media Organizing 1960s-70s *Paper 1 Due*

This week will focus on the origins of the first Pan Asian American movements on college campuses at UC Berkeley, SF State, and UCLA. Topics will include Third World Liberation Front, SF State campus sit-in, and Gidra activist zine. This lecture will contextualize Flower Drum Song, the first feature film produced by a major Hollywood studio that starred an all Asian American, as an awakening for Asian Americans within the civil rights era. We will also explore the history of pioneering AAPI media organizations such as San Francisco’s Center for Asian American Media, LA’s Visual Communications, and New York’s Asian Cinevision.

Readings:

Screening Asian Americans

Stephen Gong, *A History in Progress: Asian American Media Centers, 1970-1990*

Asian American Dreams

Helen Zia, Chapter 9 - Out on the Front Lines and Chapter 10 - Reinventing Our Culture

Yellow Power: The Formation of Asian-American Nationalism in the Age of Black Power, 1966-1975

Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar (<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/ccbh/souls/vol3no3/vol3num3art3.pdf>)

Week 6 Oct 5 – *Chinatown Rising* Film Screening and Q&A with Filmmaker Josh Chuck

Against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-1960s, a young San Francisco Chinatown resident armed with a 16mm camera and leftover film scraps from a local TV station, turned his lens onto his community. Totalling more than 20,000 feet of film (10 hours), Harry Chuck's exquisite unreleased footage has captured a divided community's struggles for self-determination. *Chinatown Rising* is a documentary film about the Asian American Movement from the perspective of the young residents on the front lines of their historic neighborhood in transition. Through publicly challenging the conservative views of their elders, their demonstrations and protests of the 1960s-1980s rattled the once quiet streets during the community's shift in power. Forty-five years later, in intimate interviews these activists recall their roles and experiences in response to the need for social change. Filmmaker Josh Chuck will screen his film in its entirety followed by a Q&A and facilitated discussion with the class.

Readings:

Asian American Dreams

Helen Zia, Chapter 3 – Detroit Blues, Chapter 4 - To Market, to Market, New York Style, Chapter 7 – Lost and Found in L.A.

Week 7 Oct 12 – *Flower Drum Song* and the Birth of a Movement

Based on a Rodgers & Hammerstein musical adapted from a novel of the same title, *Flower Drum Song* was the first feature film produced by a major Hollywood studio that starred an all Asian American cast. This lecture will contextualize the film's significance as an awakening for Asian Americans within the civil rights era. Topics will include Asian American contributions to the civil rights movement and highlight important activists such as Yuri Kochiyama, Grace Lee Boggs, and Larry Itliong. We will also engage in an in-depth discussion of the model minority myth that was designed by conservative elements in American society to pit racial minorities against one another.

Readings:

Asian American Dreams

Helen Zia, Chapter 6 - Welcome to Washington

The Flower Drum Song

C.Y. Lee, Author's Note and Introduction (David Henry Hwang)

Film: ***Model Minority: Do The Math*** (2013) dir. Teja Arboleda | 28 mins

Week 8 Oct 19 – Vincent Chin to the LA Uprising: Asian American Media Portrayal 1980-1992

Asian Americans suffered a major psychological trauma after the racially motivated murder of Chinese American Vincent Chin. This lecture will examine the role that news reporting in the early 1980s likely had in Chin's death, and explain how this inspired a new generation of activists to unite around media portrayals. This lecture will examine the deterioration of inter-minority relations in the lead up to the LA Riots and how mainstream media framed the looting of Koreatown.

Readings:

Caught in the Middle: Korean Communities in New York And Los Angeles

Pyong Gap Min, Introduction, Chapter 8 – Korean-African American Conflicts: Positive Effects, and Chapter 11 – Korean Businesses: Negative Effects

Ktown 92 Interactive Documentary

Grace Lee (<http://ktown92.com/>)

Week 9 Oct 26 – Flirting with the Mainstream: 1990s to early 2000s

From the mid-1990s to early 2000s a number of Asian Americans were able to establish themselves as fairly recognizable personalities in mainstream television and cinema. While actors such as Lucy Liu, Kal Penn, Margaret Cho, Ernie Reyes Jr, Lou Diamond Phillips, and BD Wong were working in Hollywood and studio television, a parallel movement of independent AAPI cinema was taking root. This week will introduce the Asian American “New Wave” filmmakers of the late-1990s, many of whom are active leaders within the AAPI film movement.

Readings:

Asian American Dreams

Helen Zia, Chapter 8 – For Richer, For Poorer

Asian American Filmmakers Ride in on New Wave

Kevin Thomas (<http://articles.latimes.com/1998/may/13/entertainment/ca-49090>)

Class of 97: “The Asian American New Wave”

(<https://aaiff.org/2017/events/class-of-97-panel-the-asian-american-new-wave/>)

Making Asian American Film and Video: History, Institutions, Movements

Jun Okada, Better Luck Tomorrow and the Transnational Reframing of AsAm Film

Week 10 Nov 2 – Generation YouTube: 2006-2017

Paper 2 Due

In 2006 with the advent of broadband internet and launch of YouTube this enabled a majority of Americans to access online video streaming for the first time. Realizing the enormous potential of a platform where content producers could directly interface with the public, Asian Americans notably excelled in this arena. This lecture will assess the reasons why so many AAPIs found success on YouTube, specifically analyzing Wong Fu Productions, Ryan Higa, Michelle Phan, and other megastar YouTube personalities.

Readings:

YouTube Has Made Asian-Americans Impossible for Hollywood to Ignore

Karen Hao (<https://howwegettonext.com/youtube-has-made-asian-americans-impossible-for-hollywood-to-ignore-be9c110e2be>)

The Routledge Companion to Asian American Media

Lori Kido Lopez, Asian America Gone Viral: A Genealogy of Asian American YouTubers and Memes

Film: *Uploaded: the Asian American Movement* (2012) dir. Kane Diep | 72 mins

(<https://youtu.be/1fOwijRIVqM>)

Week 11 Nov 9 No Class- Remote Engagement with Philadelphia Asian American Film Festival

This week’s class session will be canceled to allow students to engage with the 2022 PAAFF. Students should plan on attending at least five virtual programs during the festival between November 3-13 in order to adequately complete the festival reflection assignment. Participating in Opening Night, Thursday 11/3 is strongly encouraged.

Week 12 Nov 16 – Festival Debriefing

Following the virtual PAAFF events, this week will give students a chance to debrief from their online festival experience through in-depth class discussion. Students will also have an opportunity to ask any questions regarding their presentation topics or festival reflections.

Readings:

Assorted press coverage on PAAFF, TBA

Week 13 Nov 23 No Class (Thanksgiving Break Fri schedule on Wed Nov 23)

Week 14 Nov 30 – The Missing PI: Coalition Building with Pacific Islander Filmmakers

This lecture will examine the important legacy of the Kingdom of Hawaii as an early experiment in Pan-Asian multiculturalism, its subsequent colonization, and systemic suppression of native Hawaiian culture. Topics will include media representations of Hokulea, PI self-determination, and current forms of US Imperialism in the Pacific.

Readings:

From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i

Haunani-Kay Trask

A Nation Rising

Anne Keala Kelly - Resistance to Empire, Erasure, and Selling Out

Moving Images of the Pacific Islands

Introduction and Oceanic Cinema

(<http://dahi.manoa.hawaii.edu/mipi/index.php/Main>)

Pacific Islanders in Communications

History and Mission (<http://www.piccom.org/pages/history-mission>)

Week 15 Dec 7 - Mixed Race and Other Marginal Identities

Reflection Journal Due

This lecture will examine the unique experience of Mixed Race AAPIs and how their bodies have been politicized in various contexts throughout the history of cinema. This week will also include a broader discussion on the ever-expanding definition of AAPI to include groups such as undocumented youth and Arab or Islamic Asians, and discussion around Central Asian exclusion, intentional or otherwise, from many AAPI coalitions.

Readings:

Who Gets to Be 'Hapa'?

Akemi Johnson

(<http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/08/08/487821049/who-gets-to-be-hapa>)

The Misrepresented Minority: New Insights on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders

Tracy Lachina Buenavista & Angela Chuan-Ru Chen, A Counter-Story of an

Undocumented Asian American College Student

Film: ***One Big Hapa Family*** (2010) dir. Jeff Chiba Stearns | 85 mins