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Beyond the screen: Deconstructing the Orientalism towards Chinese women in films

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Abstract

Movies serve as a microcosm of society. They reflect numerous ingrained societal values and simultaneously influence people's perceptions of the world. Notably, the representation of Asian figures in films has often been entangled with Orientalism and racialization. In the wake of the film and television industry's rapid evolution and the globalizing trend, there is a discernible shift in the depiction of Chinese women within a cross-cultural context. In recent times, certain films have taken proactive measures to dismantle the entrenched Orientalist portrayal of Chinese women, offering them renewed identities and values. This paper calls for attention to the portrayal of Chinese women in films and anticipates more inclusive and equal film industries from a globalized perspective.

Keywords: Orientalism, Chinese women, Film and media

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Introduction

“[I] found no race prejudice in Europe. That’s one reason why I was so happy there... That is not always true in America”, said by Anna May Wong, the first Chinese-American film star in Hollywood (Leong). Throughout the annals of U.S. history, prejudice and discrimination towards different races have pervaded various spheres. As an important part of the United States, Chinese immigrants have consistently found themselves in unfavorable work environments and grapple with enduring stereotypes and discrimination within American society. By the late 19th century, anti-Chinese sentiments had reached their peak, and Chinese Americans were portrayed in American media as coarse, cheap labor or as cunning, evil individuals.

Nevertheless, since the mid-20th century, Chinese immigrants have gradually begun to carve out spaces in the American film and media industry to showcase their talents and express their ethnic perspectives. Anna May Wong stands as a noteworthy example of them. However, the presence of more Chinese-themed films or Chinese actors does not necessarily imply the elimination of Orientalist influences. A common misconception equates the diversification and inclusivity trends in the film industry with the deconstruction of Orientalism. Therefore, it becomes imperative to explore the core issue of Orientalism towards Chinese women in cinematic works, providing a deeper understanding of the limitations inherent in the existing depictions of Chinese women.

In examining three films written by Chinese authors: *Flower Drum Song* (1958), *The joy luck club* (1993), and *The Flowers of War* (2012), this research paper aims to discuss the progress and constraints in reshaping the Orientalist view of Chinese women in the film industry. From this analysis, this paper contends that the deconstruction of orientalist representation of Chinese

women requires a more comprehensive depiction of active and leading female characters who break the traditional social identities because we should step out of the objectification and commodification of these women.

Frameworks of Orientalism:

In this paper, I am going to examine a variety of theories related to Orientalism and apply these frameworks to discuss the three films. The concept of Orientalism can be traced back to Said's book *Orientalism*, in which Said defines it as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident.'" (1979) Said is keenly aware of the representation of the East in a way that reinforces the stereotypes and Western dominance in literature, art, and social media. With the introduction of this concept, scholars in different fields have begun to explore Orientalism from different perspectives. Some have explored forms of Orientalism through different forms such as literature, film, and television, while others establish comprehensive and insightful theories that target different groups of people categorized by race, gender, or region. In this research, I will focus on the discussions around Orientalist views of Asian American Women.

To begin with, as Võ and Sciachitano state, "global capitalism, imperialism, and militarism have long shaped the contradictory subject-positions of Asian American women as both 'working subjects' and 'desiring subjects'" (2000). On one hand, most of these immigrants to the West are confined to low-paying jobs at the bottom of the social ladder. Their cheap labor becomes part of the economic development of the West. These women are often portrayed as "docile, hardworking employees who are willing to work for lower wages or in substandard working

conditions” (Võ & Sciachitano). On the other hand, historically, due to the expansion of militarism and the desire of Asian immigrants to live in the West, many Asian women came to the West and were forced to become part of the sex industry. These women are considered “hyper-feminine erotic exotics who willingly and passively serve male desires”(Võ & Sciachitano). Just as Yamamoto mentions, “Asian American women often find themselves cast in an undifferentiated pool of Asian women whose (assumed or enforced) foreignness and physical exoticism promise a range of delights: Lotus Blossom, China Doll, Madame Butterfly, Geisha Girl, Suzy Wong, Dragon Lady” (2000). Regarding to the sexualization of Asian women, Tajima, extending from the framework of Võ and Sciachitano, divides the sexualized image of women in film and television into two types: one is lotus blossom baby, which means those who are tame and obedient women who serve the men; the other type is dragon ladies, referring to those who are often depicted as sexually charged, cunning and deceptive women (1989). Combining these two perspectives, a comprehensive classification of the portrayal and societal roles of Asian women in movies emerges: one is the working subjects, and the other is the desiring subject, which can be divided into the innocent and obedient ideal of marriage or the demonized image of the sexy seductive.

Additionally, Kim and Chung also offer us a globalized perspective to interpret Orientalist portrayal of Asian women by today’s global corporations and media platforms. They argue that by confining Asian women to racialized and gendered representations, the media and corporations objectify and commodify Asian women, thereby reinforcing the inherent social hierarchies that have long been dominated by white males (2005).

These theories serve as valuable frameworks to examine the possible reshaping of the image of Asian American women in films from the mid-20th century to the current world. In an attempt to dismantle Orientalist depictions of Chinese women, it is essential to break down these stereotypical portrayals and expand the societal roles of Chinese women, which challenge their passive portrayal in film narratives.

Flower Drum Song: Does a distinctive Asian Voice change the situation?

When talking about the changing image of the Chinese American in the American film industry, a unique voice presented by the Chinese themselves is crucial. As the first musical film with a cast mainly formed by Asian, *Flower Drum Song* has been known for its accurate portrayal of Chinese social relationships and ideologies. The movie unfolds as a love story of the two heroines, Mei Li, an obedient and virtuous Chinese woman who has illegally immigrated to San Francisco, and Linda Low, a sexy and glamorous Chinese American, who is in a relationship with Mei Li's fiancé, Sammy Fong. In order to push Sammy to marry her, Linda seduces Wang Ta, a man whom Mei Li is attracted to. At the end of the story, Mei Li and Sammy get out of their arranged marriage, and the two lovers become couples. The portrayal of the two main women in this musical has attracted the attention of researchers. Chang discusses the female characters Mei Li and Linda as products of the clash between traditional Chinese culture and American modern culture which marks the beginning of Chinese women reevaluating their roles in society (2014). As Chang writes: "The film's closing watercolor tableau depicting Mei Li and Linda as newly formed matriarchs, posing with husbands, children, and extended family, recruits these women into parables of ethnic and national regeneration." Mei Li and Linda become

representatives of women resisting patriarchy and attempting to construct new female values in the context of globalization.

Regarding the reshaping of Asian women in this musical, Kim analyzes the specificity of character Linda in more details. Kim states that “the cultural assumption of Asian gender and sexuality cannot totally and properly symbolize the excess of Linda Low’s hypersexuality, which infringes on the universal norms of beauty that have been exclusively claimed by white girls.” Therefore, “her hypersexuality becomes unfathomable, unsettling the gender and racial stereotypes of Asian women in America” (2013). However, simply presenting the image of which breaks with traditional, tame and ignorant images does not mean a true de-Orientalization. Linda’s image actually completes another piece of the puzzle of the western imagination of Asian women: a sexually appealing and exotic image of beauty that is different from Western women. From the laundrywomen to the Oriental doll, this logic of objectification and commodification of the Oriental woman is consistent. While many scholars point out that this more diverse presentation of Oriental images is already a step forward, it is clear that we need to be wary of the essential difference between diversity and de-Orientalization: whether or not a greater variety of images breaks with traditional narrative patterns and aims to present a more complete and authentic image of the Asian woman is what we should be looking for. In *Flower Drum Song*, although Mei Li and Linda somewhat broaden the Western understanding of Chinese women, the portrayal of the two female protagonists deepens the limited roles and social identities of Chinese women in Western perspectives: that is, Chinese women’s social identities are mainly derived from marriage and they continue to exist as the dependent party in the relationship between the sexes.

Furthermore, although it is not obvious, *Flower Drum Song* also has the problem of conveying the inherent social class of white supremacy through its racialized presentation of Asians. As Kim and Chung indicate: “movies like *Flower Drum Song* evolved their plots around less threatening, passive versions of Asian/American characters who happily shed their backwards ancestral culture in order to embrace the American lifestyle” (2005). In *Musical*, both Li Mei, as a Chinese immigrant, and Linda, as an American-born Chinese, choose to reject their own cultures in order to embrace the American lifestyle. Through this presentation, the musical promotes the superiority of American culture and deepens the racialized social class.

Therefore, we can recognize that simply having more Chinese actors and actresses or focusing on Chinese themes in a film, while bringing in more diverse voices, does not truly deconstruct the long-standing Orientalist representations of Chinese women. Therefore, when evaluating the image of Chinese women in cinema, we must break with the traditional female roles and social identities, and attack the long-standing social order and female values.

The Joy Luck Club & The Flowers of War: dismantling Orientalism

From the late 20th century to recent years, there has been a greater diversity of voices in the world film industry. Some of these films, whether intentionally or unintentionally, have challenged traditional Chinese female stereotypes and values in their portrayal of characters and depiction of plot, bringing forth a perspective that deconstructs Orientalism. Two of them are *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Flowers of War*.

The Joy Luck Club

The Joy Luck Club is an American drama film about four Chinese American women and their mothers as first generation immigrants to the United States. The film is based on the 1989 novel of the same name by Amy Tan, an Chinese American author. In this film, we observe two main differences in the depiction of Chinese women against the traditional orientalist view: thought liberation and shift in gender role.

To start with, Afandi talks about how the women in this film different from the traditional Chinese patriarchal image that women are propertied, characterized as weak and obedient, and are required to take on domestic responsibilities and the obligation to reproduce (2018). In *The Joy Luck Club*, the four American-born women are able to receive full education and grow up in the U.S. society where men and women are more equal. Growing up in very different cultures, the daughters often clash with some of their mothers' conservative ideas, and the daughters' more independent and daring philosophies influence the mothers as well. We should notice that this thought liberation can only happen under the immigration background where two different cultures interact and contradict as shown in the relationships between the mothers and the daughters. To emphasize this point, Jin writes: "the Chinese women's pursuits of freedom" reflected in this film "map the movement towards a further liberation of Chinese American women in the United States" (2019).

This emancipation goes hand in hand with the transformation of women's gender role, more specifically, the role of marriage, in the film. Turuk's study emphasizes the struggle of Asian women in *The Joy Luck Club* as a form of resistance to patriarchal society. As Turuk indicates,

“[the film] succeeded in promoting the struggle of women as a form of resistance” by showing women “daring to get out of the unhappy marriage life, challenging the oppressive husband, pursuing their salary and equal household needs” (2020). Facing an unhappy marriage, Anmei Su’s daughter Rose, encouraged by her mother, chooses to bravely defy her husband to fight for an equal marriage relationship for herself. Meanwhile, when her boyfriend, Richie, upsets her own mother because he does not know Chinese table manners due to cultural differences, Waverly does not choose to be silent and endure, but directly raises the conflict with her own boyfriend and hopes that he can change. Here, we observe that, unlike in the past, these daughters play a more active role in the relationship: whereas in the Orientalist perspective, women tend to be objectified, this film discusses women as protagonists while also depicting Chinese American daughters in a more active position in their family relationships.

The Flowers of War

The Flowers of War is a movie about the history of the Anti-Japanese War period made by the well-known Chinese director Zhang Yimou. Unlike many Chinese films, in this film, female characters are not “insignificant and one-dimensional in the storyline. (McGuire)” The film tells the tragic story of a group of prostitutes (euphemistically known as the women of the Qinhuai River) who pose as a group of schoolgirls and are bullied and killed by the Japanese soldiers during the Japanese invasion of China. The film breaks the stereotypical Orientalist portrayal of Chinese women and celebrates their greatness.

Firstly, Yang discusses how this film deconstructs the orientalist narrative of the white savior tale. The hero of the film, John Miller, is a white male who pretends to be a priest in order to

escape from the war. Unlike the classic story of a white male rescuing a weak Asian woman, “John is reduced to a rather powerless position amidst rampant atrocities” (2014). Although he tries to negotiate with the Japanese soldier negotiate with the Japanese soldiers, when the Japanese soldiers break into the church and kill the schoolgirl, John can only shed tears and touch her hand to express his sorrow and sympathy, but does not get to appear as a hero figure.

Moreover, as Yang notices, “the white savior tale is further obscured by the exotic description of Chinese women’s empowerment” (2014). The female protagonist, Yumo, differs from the traditional image of women in that she is a talented and knowledgeable woman: she is educated, speaks English and serves as a bridge between the women of the Qinhuai River and John. At the same time, she is not a submissive who obeys men’s orders, but an inspiring leader and proactive practitioner: initially, she makes use of John’s status as a Westerner to protect herself and her companions from harm, and she calmly faces John’s flirtatious harassment; she offers to take the place of the schoolgirls when they are taken away by the Japanese army. Her ability and vision break the traditional understanding of Chinese women as wives and elevate the character to a higher level. Most importantly, the movie shows the fearlessness of these prostitutes’ family spirit. Though still in a vulnerable position, these women's minds break the stereotype of the submissive and weak Oriental woman and take on the role of national heroes, saviors, an identity that is often given to men.

Despite breaking the white savior tale, this film also dismantles Orientalism by challenging the entrenched social hierarchy which Kim and Chung describe as the purpose of Orientalism.

Altaher proposes an innovative interpretation of the sacrifice of the Qinhuai River women to save the female students as a form of resistance against the hierarchy existing in wartime (2017). The movie explicitly delineates a wartime hierarchy through the lens of colonialism. The priest, symbolizing the apex of this hierarchy, wields authority by virtue of his European and white identity. Beneath him, the Japanese military assumes the role of colonizers, engaging in expansionist endeavors to conquer Nanjing. Further down the hierarchy, the Chinese female students depicted in the film epitomize a vulnerable group as the colonized, and descending even lower are the women of the Qinhuai River. In the context of colonization, the women of the Qinhuai River's defiance of the demand from Japanese soldiers can be seen as a form of resistance to invasion, and thus a challenge to the inherent social order.

However, even when it's Chinese directors making films with women as leading characters, we have to realize how difficult it is to get rid of orientalism in the film industry which is long-dominated by Western works, and it is clear that the women in *The Flowers of War* have not completely escaped the scrutiny of orientalism. One could even say that the movie is somehow caught in the vortex of "the Oriental's orientalism" (McGuire). This is an innovative idea proposed by Lau in her article "Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals." Lau describes Re-Orientalism as the inclination for the Orientals to adopt a pattern where the dominant groups express and represent the others in a way that positions the others in a subalternism (2009). First of all, the costumes and shots in this movie are not free from the image of "desiring subject" to a large extent. There are many shots of Yumo's buttocks and her back, and Yumo and the other women wear beautiful, figure-hugging cheongsams. The camera excessively focuses on the physical appearance of women, presenting

them with a gaze that carries exotic undertones. This kind of filming technique is still characteristic of Orientalism.

On the other hand, the frameworks for understanding Orientalism of Asian women proposed by Võ and Sciachitano and Tajima only refer to how they are perceived by others, not how they perceive themselves. In fact, if we examine women's subjective understanding of themselves, despite the fact that these women of the Qinhuai River break the traditional identity of being rescued, their self-consciousness remains stuck in a perspective of self-depreciation and submission to hierarchy. In the movie, they choose to die for the schoolgirls not only out of kindness, but also because of the deep-rooted notion that their status as prostitutes determines them to be in a more inferior position. This submissive, docile self-perception is in fact a reflection of Orientalism and the male gaze. This is another reason why the film is not fundamentally de-Orientalized, but may be caught in a new spiral of Orientalism.

Conclusion

Deconstructing Orientalism is by no means an overnight transformation. However, we must recognize the various elements of Orientalist depictions of Chinese women evident in contemporary films as the initial step. Simultaneously, in addressing the current issues within film narratives, there is a need to present more female characters who genuinely challenge ingrained societal values and class structures. These portrayals must transcend passivity, static positioning, and the role of the "other," thereby breaking the longstanding objectification of Chinese women. The most fundamental yet challenging step is to cultivate an attitude of equality and respect, endeavoring to understand groups, cultures, and races that differ from one's own.

This requires embracing the unique qualities and richness inherent in each individual within these diverse communities. Just as Said proposes: “humanism is the only, and I would go so far as to say, the final resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history” (1979).

Annotated Bibliography

Altaher, B. B. (2017). Geling Yan's *The Flowers of War*: Bitterness and Sacrifice in Colonized China. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 23(1), 132-137.

This article provides an innovative interpretation of the original work of "*The Flowers of War*." Altaher delves into the history of the Japanese invasion of China during World War II, offering a deeper understanding of the "colonist's gaze" portrayed in the film. Altaher points out that colonizers exhibit both appreciation and a conquering attitude towards exotic cultures. This colonist's perspective is reflected in the evident hierarchical structure in the movie: the priest, representing the highest rank, the Japanese military acting as colonizers in their expansionist attempts to conquer Nanjing, and the Chinese female students in the film represent an extremely vulnerable group, positioned as absolute underdogs. However, it's crucial to note that beneath the female students, the lowest stratum consists of the women from the Qinhuai River. Altaher emphasizes not only the class distinctions but also the commodification of Oriental women in the movie. The Japanese soldiers, as depicted in the film, seek to exploit female students as comfort women, a byproduct of colonization. The sacrifice of the women of Qinhuai River to save the female students becomes a form of resistance against the invasion.

This source analyzes "*The Flowers of War*" from the perspective of the invasion movement. In fact, in my paper, I employ the framework proposed by Võ and Sciachitano, highlighting that imperialism and aggression are pivotal in the sexualization and commodification of Asian women. Interpreting the sacrifice of the Qinhuai River women as resistance against this aggression is a way of actively challenging the orientalist view. However, I am concerned that this film promotes the solidification of class distinctions through the sacrifice of the women of Qinhuai River. This article provides an opportunity to discuss the implications of the portrayal and identity of Asian women in "*The Flowers of War*" from various perspectives.

Kim, M., & Chung, A. Y. (2005). Consuming orientalism: Images of Asian/american women in multicultural advertising. *Qualitative Sociology*, 28(1), 67-91.

In this article, Kim and Chung discuss the Orientalist portrayal of Asian women by today's global corporations and media platforms from the perspective of globalized culture. The authors emphasize that Asian women are presented as the "other" and are confined within racialized and gendered representations. This stereotypical image is commodified by corporations and media, presented in a new form of global culture, with the purpose of reinforcing the longstanding inherent social hierarchy favoring white males.

This research interprets Orientalism from a globalized viewpoint and connects it with consumer culture, exploring how the racialized descriptions and commodification of Asian women in the Orientalist perspective deepen inherent social hierarchies. This theory serves as a valuable tool for interpreting Orientalist portrayals of Asian women in films: the choice of immigrants in "*Flower Drum Song*" to embrace American culture can be seen as a manifestation of Orientalism, while the female resistance against societal class distinctions in "*The Flowers of War*" can be understood as a deconstruction of this Orientalist view. This source supplements my exploration of Orientalism theories, bringing a more diverse perspective to the discussion.

LAU, L. (2009). Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals. *Modern Asian Studies*, 43(2), 571-590. doi:10.1017/S0026749X07003058

In Lau's article, she proposes a new idea called Re-Orientalism as a perpetuation of Orientalism. The core of this concept is still the dominant groups of people expressing and representing the others, and positioning the others in a subalternism. However, the main difference is that Re-Orientalism is propagated by the Orientals instead of Occidentals, which can be called "the Oriental's Orientalism".

Lau's point is very important to my study of the Orientalist representation of Asian women in the modern film industry. Our understanding of Orientalism is often limited to Western literature, films, and social media, but it overlooks the fact that there is now a new kind of Orientalized representation of Asian women in works created by Orientals themselves as a result of the intersection and clash of cultures. By including such a

perspective in my research, I can better understand some of the limitations in deconstructing Orientalist representations in the three films adapted from Chinese American or Chinese authors.

Said, E. W. (1979). *Orientalism* / Edward W. Said. (First Vintage Books edition.). Vintage Books.

In Said's book *Orientalism*, he introduces the idea as representation of the East in a way that reinforces the stereotypes and Western dominance. In his work, he describes how Eastern culture and people are portrayed as "others" in the western world.

When it comes to the discussion of Orientalism, Edward Said is one of the founders in this field. He explores the representation of the east in Western discourse and proposes the idea of Orientalism. Delving into the origin of this idea, I can get a better sense of how it evolves in different fields, which can build a broader background of my essay.

Tajima, R. E. (1989). Lotus blossoms don't bleed: Images of Asian women. In Asian Women United of California (Ed.), *Making waves: An anthology of writings by and about Asian American women* (pp. 308–317). Boston: Beacon Press.

In this article, Tajima proposes a dichotomy for us to understand the portrayal of Asian women in the films. Firstly, she points out that Asian women's roles in films are often limited to being the objects of male romantic relationships and that this portrayal is oversimplified and inaccurate. She describes that there are two basic types of these women: one is lotus blossom baby, which means those who are tame and obedient women who serve the men; the other type is dragon ladies, referring to those who are often depicted as sexually charged, cunning and deceptive women. In addition to this, Tajima emphasizes that an important feature of orientalist representation of Asian women characters is invisibility; in film and television, Asian women's figures are highly connected to sexuality. Their identities are often associated with love or marriage to men, rather than being ordinary, independent characters.

In my research paper, I analyzed three films to understand why the female characters in “*The Flower Drum Song*” do not really break away from Orientalism, and why the portrayal of women in *The Flowers of War* and *The Joy Luck Club* is moving away from the stereotypes (one by broadening the ways in which women take on the role of national heroes in invisibility, and the other by presenting realistic and accurate depictions of women’s social relationships and family life in invisibility).

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