

BEING

ASIAN

IN

HOLLYWOOD

Monique Jones

JUST ADD  
COLOR



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Whiteness as the  
Default - 5

The Pain of  
Exoticism - 8

The #OscarsSoWhite  
Effect - 14

What Hollywood's  
doing right & wrong  
- 18

What Audiences  
Need to Know - 20



*Being Asian in Hollywood* took the cooperation of Hollywood industry members and creators.

(Top row, from left) Sinakhone Keodara, Jodi Long, Asia Jackson, Kesav Wable.

(Bottom row from left) Quentin Lee, Mandeep Sethi, Kunjue Li, Chris Tashima.

Thank you!



Representation in Hollywood is an issue by itself, but Asian representation in Hollywood is near non-existent. With the state of Hollywood being that black equates “diversity” and Asian characters are still overrun with stereotypes or whitewashing, Asian actors and actresses have had a tough uphill battle in breaking through the glass ceiling.

# WHITENESS AS THE DEFAULT

Historically, Hollywood has used Asian locales and people as props, while white characters are given layered characteristics. In short, white characters have been treated as humans, while everyone and everything else are only developed in stereotypes.

The most recent examples of this include *The Birth of the Dragon*, in which a white character is used to frame Bruce Lee's biopic, *Doctor Strange*, which sees Tilda Swinton playing an Asian role and Benedict Cumberbatch as Doctor Strange, which is a white character used to exploit a stereotypical Asian mysticism, *Ghost in the Shell*, which uses Japanese culture to frame Scarlett Johansson as The Major and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* series, which features India as a backdrop for white characters and Dev Patel playing a stereotypical Indian character.

“What’s particularly silly about *The Birth of the Dragon* is that they invented a fictional white character thinking that that would be what North American audience would want,” wrote Quentin Lee, *The Unbidden* director and founder of Margin Films in an email interview. “The filmmakers obviously fell flat on their faces. Not only it wasn’t historically accurate for the story, the film ended up insulting Bruce Lee and the audience who would support it. It was a creative misfire.”

Chris Tashima, an Academy-winning director for the 1998 short film *Visas and Virtue* and co-founder of Cedar Grove Productions, wrote that while he hasn’t seen *The Birth of the Dragon* yet, he found the basis of the film “ridiculous.”

“It’s understandable, why this has been the practice—being that traditionally, decision



IMDB

have been white males, and like anyone else, will want to see stories about themselves, and that audiences have traditionally been thought of as young, white males,” he wrote. “However, all of that is changing. It has been changing for a while, and it’s easy to see where it’s going: towards a diverse world. That’s an old practice and you’d think Hollywood would want to project, and put themselves on the cutting edge, and be more inclusive. It’s old, and tired, and more and more, I think audiences will want to see something different, something more truthful.”

“I think the overarching theme that runs through how Hollywood/the West represents POCs has to do with the ease with which they are able to strip POCs of agency over their own stories,” wrote Kesav Wable, Brooklyn-based actor, writer, 2011 HBO American Black Film Festival finalist for his short film, *For Flow* and Sundance lab short-listed screenwriter for a script about a Pakistani boxer wrongfully accused of planning a terror attack.

“This may come across as a bit exaggerated or radical, but I do believe that there is a link between white imperialist concepts such as ‘manifest destiny’ and ‘white man's burden,’ which validated a lot of the literal takings from POCs that happened throughout earlier periods in civilized history, and now, in a media-hungry world where information, content, and stories are the most valuable currencies, there is an analogous “taking” of the narratives that POCs have lived through. By depicting POC characters through the lens of a white character, it enables white audiences to keep POCs' stories at arm's length, and to not completely empathize with those characters because they are not given the complete human dignity and complexity that is afforded the white character.”

“Perhaps, this, in a way, damps down the guilt that white audiences may feel if the POCs stories/circumstances have to do with the literal takings that were exacted by their ancestors. Or it's just good for a cheap laugh. The truly insidious effect of POCs being usurped from their own narratives is that, even many of us POCs begin to start viewing things through a white lens and stop questioning whether these stories truly represent who we are because of how pervasive white-controlled media is.”

Wable used the upcoming film *Happy End*, which is about a bourgeois European family living amid the current refugee crisis. “Granted, I haven't seen the film, so it'd be presumptive of me to conclude that refugees are not conferred with dignity/complexity as characters, but the very thought that French filmmakers think that shining a light on a bourgeois family with the refugee crisis as a ‘backdrop’ can be instructive about their world, speaks volumes about what it is white people are most interested in; themselves,” he wrote. “In this case, apparently, the context is a rueful rumination on their own blindness to the refugees' plight. Somehow the irony of the very film's existence as a manifestation of

that blindness seems to be lost on them.”

Mandeep Sethi, filmmaker and emcee, also discussed about Hollywood's tendencies to erase non-white people from their own stories. “I think centralizing POC stories around white characters is Hollywood's way of taking a black or brown story and making it about white people,” he said. “Our culture is full of amazing stories and histories and Hollywood loves to cherry pick what they like but leave out the real nitty gritty including the people who created, interacted, and setup that story.”

Sinakhone Keodara, founder CEO of Asian Entertainment Television and host of Asian Entertainment Tonight, wrote that Hollywood's penchant for using whiteness as a default is “a heinous tradition that is long overdue for a change.”

“Rather than trying to normalize Asian presence on screen to a wide American audience, Hollywood often goes the tired, well-worn and 'safe' route of using a white character in an attempt to more easily relate the character to a majority white American audience. It's cheap and unnecessary, because the proper and more effective way of relating a character to an audience is writing a character with emotional depth,” he said. “Ethnicity informs and colors our individual and community experiences, but emotion transcends ethnic boundaries. With political correctness aside, Hollywood needs to stop engaging in a form of neo-emotional and neo-psychological colonialism against people of color, especially Asians by injecting whiteness into our stories.”

“I think that centralizing PoC stories around white characters is always going to happen as long as the people telling these stories are white,” wrote Asia Jackson, an actress, model and content creator.

“What Hollywood needs is not only diversity on-camera, but to also make greater efforts to allow filmmakers of color to tell their own stories.”

Jodi Long, an actress who was a castmember of the first Asian American TV sitcom *All-American Girl* and member of the actors branch of Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, wrote that while whiteness as the default is the reality in Hollywood, a study shows a much needed change in film. “I just saw a new study *The Inclusion Quotient* done by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media where the reality in terms of box office is changing, where



Dev Patel in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*. (Twentieth Century Fox/IMDB)

the reality in terms of box office is changing, where women and diverse actors in lead roles are now performing *extremely* well," she wrote. "Money talks in Hollywood but we still have to get beyond the implicit (unconscious) bias that factors into which projects get greenlit based on outmoded ways of thinking."

Kunjue Li, *Ripper Street* actress and founder of China Dolls Productions Ltd., also addressed how money rules Hollywood, despite Hollywood not making the audience demand actually work for them financially. "I don't think [whitewashing] is the right thing to do, and second of all, I don't think it's very commercial," she said. "... [I]f they want to sell to Chinese audiences, which is the second biggest film market, then they need to tell a Chinese story...I think you have to tell a Chinese story [with] a Chinese cast."

"If the film [was] an American-Chinese co-production, [it would] actually help with the film itself because then it doesn't have to go through the quota system...which means that only 30 percent of foreign films are allowed to show in China markets every year. If they do it as a co-production, then they get 1/3 of Chinese funding, but they have to have 1/3 of a Chinese [cast]. They'll have one-third of Chinese funding, they'll have domestic showings, they don't have to go through the quota system, it's much more feasible. Commercially, [whitewashing] doesn't even work. I don't understand why people keep doing that."

I don't think [whitewashing] is the right thing to do, and second of all, I don't think it's very commercial. ...I don't understand why people keep doing that.  
-Kunjue Li



Scarlett Johansson as The Major (Major Kusanagi) in *Ghost in the Shell*. (Paramount)

# THE PAIN OF EXOTICISM

From Fu Manchu to the Dragon Lady, from the mystic to the terrorist, Hollywood has embraced stereotypical, damaging stereotypes of Asian characters based in the xenophobic propaganda of the past.



Boris Karloff and Myrna Loy in *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (IMDB)



“It’s a long, deep-rooted, embedded tradition, that has fed on itself, perpetuated itself, and has never had (until recently), any opposition, or motivation for change. It goes back before ‘Hollywood,’ to preceding forms of media or entertainment (literature, theatre, etc.),” wrote Tashima. “This country has been dominated by Eurocentric values throughout its history, so any truthful Asian voice or perspective has never had a chance to oppose, or offer any balance.”

Wable wrote that using these stereotypes isn’t just racist; it’s also lazy.

“The use of stereotypes to represent Asian characters is another manifestation of how POCs

narratives are stripped of agency and dignity. It’s representative of an intellectual sloth on the part of white storytellers to deem any deeper examination of their Asian characters unwarranted because, most likely, the story isn’t about them in the first place,” he said.

“If the Asians serve as plot devices to further the white character’s narrative, the storyteller can treat them as an afterthought and revert to the stereotype as shorthand to achieve the desired effect. This tendency is very much tied up with the colonial structures that functioned as the mediums through which the white world interacted with Asians,” he said. “In most cases, it’s only been a hundred years or so that these structures gave way, at least



formally, to independent nation states that went on to forge their own identities. But the structures have endured psychologically, both in the minds of the colonizer and the colonized (for e.g., the widespread use of fairness cream among brown Asians and Africans, as evidence of internalized racism). The consequence that this gaze brings with it w/ respect to brown Asian characters is that we are often represented as obsequious, bookish, goofy, creepy, emasculated (in the case of males), or exotic, helpless, prudish, jealous and naive (in the case of females).”

Sethi wrote about how today’s xenophobia has directly affected him.

“Brown Asian characters have historically been erased from the narratives, as well as dumbed down as if they do not play a significant role due to their brown skin. That is shameful,” he wrote. “Being a brown, turban wearing bearded man, I see the direct impact of that type of casting in my everyday life. I think that casting directors are controlled by those above them and no one is being creative. Obviously it’s easy to pin a brown man with a turban and a beard in that type of role. A real casting agent with real creativity will think outside the box and work to destroy that narrative that most people know is not true!”

Keodara wrote that the state of Asian representation in entertainment is something the industry has to reckon with. “Unconscious bias and ‘tradition,’ meaning some of our well-meaning ‘friends’ grew up in the same racist America and some of that bias is entrenched in [Hollywood’s] thinking, and secondly, it’s what they’ve done for a very long time and feel comfortable in continuing to do because as movie budgets grow bigger Hollywood feels the pressure to make ‘safer and safer’ choices and because status quo equals ‘safe,” he wrote. “If the American public is accustomed to seeing Asians in one way, then it’s cheap and easy to just let the continue to see what they’re used to. To be frank, I mean this as a condemnation of the American public. This is 2016, if you’re shelling out your hard-earned money to see movies that whitewashes Asian characters and turn the other cheek, then you’re just as guilty.”

With so much going wrong, how can change be made? First, it starts with recognizing that Asian America includes more than just descendants of Chinese and Japanese immigrants.

“... ‘Asian’ in Hollywood really means ‘East Asian’. South & Southeast Asians are nearly erased from American media. A lot of the stereotypes associated

with Asians in media come from ignorance that, well, stem from racism,” wrote Jackson. “Most Americans don’t understand just how large and diverse ‘Asia really is. They don’t understand that China and Japan are separate countries with different cultures. They think everything is the same, every country has the same culture and philosophies. And that ignorance comes from lack of representation in the media! It’s a cycle that keeps going ‘round & ‘round and will never break until accurate representations of Asia are shown & our stories, told.”

Second, as many have written, it takes people speaking out about the lack of opportunities for Asian actors.

Some have welcomed actors like Lewis Tan, Constance Wu, and George Takei for using their platforms to raise awareness about the lack of Asian representation.

“Actors using platform for change is important and the first revolutionary step towards equity within television and on the big screen,” wrote Sethi. “Equity amongst roles.”

“I think they’re doing a really good job,” said Li.

“...I think we need people like that to keep voicing [their sentiments] because it’s not about bankable stars; you make a star, and you make a good enough production to have people supporting it. It’s going to make money anyway.”

“What they said about *Ghost in the Shell* and that there are no bankable Asian stars, that doesn’t really stand,” she said. “With *The Hunger Games*, Jennifer Lawrence wasn’t a bankable star yet. It’s about the best person suited for the role. I think that the stars speaking out, who are doing their part, I think that’s amazing. I wish I can do my part as well in the future when I get big.”

“I think the main factor that’s contributed to such a noticeable spike in Asian American actors/creatives speaking out about whitewashing is social media and its ability to show the industry’s gatekeepers that POC audiences are ‘woke’ and finally able to commensurate over the frustrations of rarely seeing fully realized representations of our lives on television,” wrote Wable. “The few Asian Americans who have reached a level of visibility and do use their platforms to advocate for that change,



Constance Wu (IMDB)

whether it be through confronting the issues head on, or simply, shining a light on fellow lesser-known Asian American creatives, realize that their most loyal fan bases are largely made up of people who have been waiting to see their lives reflected in mainstream culture. And the gatekeepers are realizing that this level of engagement by POCs actually helps their bottom line so it's not 'career suicide' for an Asian American celebrity to speak frankly on these issues anymore since the numbers make the argument for inclusive storytelling even stronger."

Jackson, Tashima, and Keodara also contribute the rise of awareness about Asian Americans in Hollywood to social media.

"I think most of the change comes from social media. Before social media, there was no outlet that allowed people to voice their opinions or experiences to a mass audience. If you wanted to reach a mass audience, you needed to appear in a magazine, newspaper, television, etc. Now, with social media, you're able to do that instantly," wrote Jackson. "I think that more actors and actresses are using their platforms for change simply because they can. They can call for change and have thousands of people around the world support them. I think we feel more comfortable speaking out now because there are thousands of people, whom we can interact with, that can agree with and push for our call for change."

"Beyond just the fact that we (POC) are tired of it, I think there are two factors that are contributing.

One is social media. That has leveled the playing field in terms of expression, and publicity. It's no longer limited to coverage in 'The Press,' or costly publicist or PR budgets. Anyone with something interesting or relevant can reach millions of people, with at tweet or post," wrote Tashima. "Second is that we have more prominent artists. We've never had a George Takei, with his 1.8M followers, and name recognition that comes with it, or a Constance Wu, who is the star if a successful TV network sitcom. Through them, we're finally being heard."

"Insofar as Asian American actors are concerned, first is their establishment as incredible actors and pillars of the acting and filmmaking community. They have achieved the reputation and legacy that gives their words weight that wasn't there forty or even twenty years ago," wrote Keodara. "Second is accessibility. Celebrities can connect to their fans more swiftly and directly than ever before through social media, and those fans can then propagate their messages at an exponential rate. In print media, you'd have to convince the papers and magazines that you're worth reporting on; the only barrier to entry now is how effectively you can utilize 140 characters to convey your message. Third is a social awareness. People, especially young people, care more now about seeing proper representation of POC. There is not only a desire but a demand to see better representations. These three things combined give Asian American actors and actresses means and motivation to fight for change."

Lee is less concerned about what actors say on social media and more about what is “creatively and commercially what’s best for the movie” in terms of driving Asian careers in Hollywood.

“Look at a film like [Bernardo] Bertolucci’s *The Last Emperor* that has spawned a generation of Asian American stars such as John Lone, Joan Chen, Dennis Dun, Vivian Wu, Victor Wong and Lisa Lu that we still love,” he wrote. “Mind you, that was made in 1987. That’s the level of creative feat that culture creators and Hollywood should aspire toward.”

Also, despite the amount of voices out there spreading awareness, there’s still a wall in place for many Asian actors when it comes to landing meaningful roles.

“Unfortunately, the reality is that it’s everyone’s bottom line that will ultimately carry the day,” wrote Wable. “[W]hen I still hear from my friend who tried to refer me to a talent agency, that it passed on me because ‘they already have a brown Asian male’ who plays my age on their roster, it’s clear to me that the change will most certainly be slow and incremental no matter who is on that soapbox at the top.”

Whether people believe the actors who are speaking out are doing so from a genuine place or from a more politically correct stance, what they are writing and saying in interviews taps into something that many Asian Americans feel every day; that they are constantly the Other.

How much is Hollywood to blame for this feeling?

“Let’s not give Hollywood that much credit or blame Hollywood that much,” wrote Lee. “For generations people blame Hollywood for inspiring violence in the society. Well, sadly, violence, like racism and stereotyping, in America is real. The question is can Hollywood and independent filmmakers rise above the societal banality and inspire otherwise.”

Others, though, believe that Hollywood is, in fact, at least partly to blame for generations of people feeling ostracized in their own skin.

“[Asian people] on TV is not proportional. So a lot of kids growing up, they don’t see their own people on TV,” said Li. “...They feel like outsiders. I don’t think that’s good socially.”

Wable addressed how Hollywood’s reinforcement of stereotypes become internalized, not just with Americans in general, but with Asian Americans as well.

” I find myself struggling with this internalized racism every time I sit down to write a brown Asian character. The use of stereotypes to represent Asian characters is another manifestation of how POCs narratives are stripped of agency and dignity,” he wrote. “It’s representative of an intellectual sloth on the part of white storytellers to deem any deeper examination of their Asian characters unwarranted because, most likely, the story isn’t about them in the first place. If the Asians serve as plot devices to further the white character’s narrative, the storyteller can treat them as an afterthought and revert to the stereotype as shorthand to achieve the desired effect. This tendency is very much tied up with the colonial structures that functioned as the mediums through which the white world interacted with Asians.”

Wable wrote that much of the stereotypes stem from colonization. Even though the times of colonization might be over, he wrote, “...the structures have endured psychologically, both in the minds of the colonizer and the colonized (for e.g., the widespread use of fairness cream among brown Asians and Africans, as evidence of internalized racism). The consequence that this gaze brings with it w/ respect to brown Asian characters is that we are often represented as obsequious, bookish, goofy, creepy, emasculated (in the case of males), or exotic, helpless, prudish, jealous and naive (in the case of females).”

Long, Tashima and Keodara shared the similar sentiments.

“It just perpetuates stereotypes which continually keeps us in the place of ‘the other’ never taking into account that we are human beings that have the same goals, issues, dreams like everyone else,” wrote Long.

“Race representation is important to our youth. They must see themselves in order to hope for a better tomorrow. I think we are stuck where we are because there has been too much repeated generation after generation,” wrote Tashima. “This cry for diversity is not new. Also, it limits our expression, and growth through art. It is untruthful. It is short-changing the audience. There is so much more to tell, for us to learn, for all to appreciate—other than just the white male

hero or romantic interest.”

“Just [recently] Fox News sent correspondent Jesse Watters as part of the *O’Reilly Factor* program to interview Asian Americans in New York City’s Chinatown about the [then] upcoming presidential election and it had some of the worst racist stereotyping of Asians I’ve seen in recent memory. Worse still was Bill O’Reilly brushing it off as ‘gentle fun.’

Watters said, ‘it’s all in good fun,’ but that would only be true if the subjects of your fun were in the joke,” wrote Keodara. “The harm of Hollywood’s whitewashing and stereotyping comes in pushing off Asian frustration and resentment with stereotypical treatment as any form of ‘fun.’ This was one of those opportunities for listening to Asian Americans. I swear if an Asian person was given the opportunity to review the tape before airtime, that segment would never have seen the light of day. But, you have a couple of privileged white boys bullying Asians for a few laughs and for ratings purposes. It’s despicable!”

Jackson also added that the limitations of Asian representation in Hollywood limits how she’s seen as a biracial black/Asian woman.

“In Hollywood, I’m only really allowed to play African-American. There are some exceptions, however with such a lack of representation for other races, 99% of the time I am auditioning as a Black girl. I’m not allowed to audition as an Asian girl, ever, even though that is literally half of my identity,” wrote Jackson. “I have half white/half Asian actor friends that tell me that they’re ‘too Asian to play white’ or ‘too white to play Asian.’ In addition, interracial relationships in television and film almost always include a white person. Most interracial couples in media are white/black, white/Asian, etc. There is so little representation for interracial couples of color. In general, I feel that there needs to be more stories told about biracial or mixed identities because we have very different experiences from our ‘full-blooded’ peers.”

Wable agrees.

“I’ll lead with a disclaimer that I’m not



Daniel Wu as Sunny and Madeleine Mantock as Veil in *Into the Badlands*, Season 1. Veil and Sunny are one of the few black/Asian pairings on TV. (Patti Perret/AMC)

biracial, but I have noticed that biracial identities are almost non-existent in mainstream media and I wonder whether that’s because biracial coupling is still very taboo in this country, and perhaps, globally with a few exceptions,” he wrote. “To acknowledge a character’s biracial identity, one would imagine you’d have to acknowledge their lineage and I think Hollywood is so risk averse, they’d rather steer completely clear of that topic if they can avoid it.”

Wable believes that the lack of biracial characters in Hollywood is part of society trying to keep a racial status quo. “Staying with my theme of tracing this phenomenon back to its roots, I think it’s linked to the constructed white fear of miscegenation which introduces too dangerous a possibility that closes the gap between whites and POCs, that brings POCs into the fold as humans on equal footing with whites. It’s much easier to have a clear distinction between the races even though we all know that’s not how normal society operates,” he wrote. “This explains why biracial actors undergo a sort of erasure/scrubbing that makes them belong to one race, and if they are fortunate enough to ‘pass’ as both white and ‘ethnic’ all the better for their careers. I think what needs to change is just creators being bold enough to tell stories about biracial couples.”

Wable named two films that are already doing this, *Loving*, starring Ruth Negga and Joel Edgerton in the real life story of the Lovings, who fought for their right to marry, and the comedy-horror *Get Out* by Jordan Peele which features a black man visiting his white girlfriend’s spooky family in a part of town where several black men have already gone missing.

eCombating internalized racism and a lack of representation can be reduced down to one simple thing: giving Asian writers, actors, producers and directors more opportunities to create the narratives they want to see.

One of the current major examples of an Asian narrative being written from a non-Asian perspective is the upcoming live-action *Mulan* adaptation.

“What needs to change is Hollywood studios need to stop hiring white screenwriters to write POC stories such as the recent controversy with Disney studios hiring two white ladies who rewrote *Mulan*’s story placing a white dude at the center of *Mulan*’s legend. That’s a tired trop that needs to be laid to rest,” wrote Keodara. “Disney has since revealed that they’ve hired two new writers but they are still white. Hollywood needs to start hiring Asian American writers to write Asian stories. And, in the alternative, at the very least hire some Asian American consultants to maintain cultural sensitivity to the material.”

The changing demographics are also begging for their wants to be heard by Hollywood.

“[D]emographics are changing, and audiences will dictate a different idea, and also, creative forces are changing, and will be expressing different viewpoints. So, my belief is that it is inevitable that it will change,” wrote Tashima. “The question may be, how can we speed things up? My answer to that is, keep speaking up. Keep creating. Keep supporting our own artists.”

Hollywood is just now only beginning to address the changing demographics thanks to April Reign’s #OscarsSoWhite hashtag, which became extremely popular after films like *Straight Outta Compton* and *Beasts of No Nation* failed to garner any Oscars, despite their critical and financial success.

“I think this past year #Oscarssowhite coupled with the casting of Scarlet Johansson, Emma Stone, Tilda Swinton became the tipping point that saw a flood of outcries and outrage everywhere,” wrote Long. “It was a galvanizing confluence of events and it is important that our high profiles and we as a community keep ‘squeaking the wheel.’ The longer the conversation continues it will educate, enlighten and ultimately effect the change that has been too long in coming.”

“We owe some of this progress to April Reign for starting the #OscarsSoWhite hashtag. The success of that movement has emboldened Asian Americans that we too deserve our day in the sun,” wrote Keodara, who also thanked the Asian American members of the Academy (including Long) for demanding an apology from host Chris Rock, who made some discriminatory jokes at the expense of Asian American kid actors, and other actors for using their platforms to advance change.

“I’d be remiss if I didn’t [also] mention Ming-na Wen and Constance [Wu] for risking their careers to lend their voices and spoke up to demand change which culminated in the #whitewashedOUT movement,” he wrote. “...Hollywood has an aversion to risk, which is understandable, but is precisely the thing that needs to change. But there have been study after study after study that should have laid those fears to rest because each of those studies showed that diversity is good for business.”

As Long succinctly put it, “It’s really about raising the consciousness one mind at a time.”

Demographics are changing, and audiences will dictate a different idea and also creative forces are changing, and will be expressing different viewpoints. So, my belief is that it is inevitable that [Hollywood] will change.

-Chris Tashima

# THE #OSCARSSOWHITE EFFECT

The #OscarsSoWhite movement led to the Academy opening their doors to many more people of color in the ranks. However, it was still later that the Academy invited more Asian industry members into the organization; this only came after several in the industry demanded that the oversight be corrected.

“I think the initial exclusion of Asians from the Academy is, again, a symptom of the importance that Hollywood attributes to the Asian experience, which is to say, it’s not considered very important. An institution’s membership is indicative of the values it espouses. And until very recently, the Academy’s values were almost interchangeable with the values of old white males,” wrote Wable. “Of course, the counter to that could be, ‘well it’s not like POCs weren’t honored by the Academy with nominations and awards when meritorious enough to warrant such recognition.’ But putting the meager percentage of those nominations and awards aside, the very privilege of being arbiters in the decision to lift certain voices and narratives over others is a political power that is imbued with the prejudices of those making the decisions.”

“I think adding Asian members to the Academy is a great start but I don’t think it’s as simple as just putting names and faces that look and sound Asian on the board. I think, to truly make a change, it has to be a deeper consideration of the values that the individual who is invited on the Board wants to bring to the role, and the tenacity with which they are willing to be a voice for those values and excluded narratives,” he wrote. “I would even go so far as to say that it’s this question, not the racial/ethnic identity that should inform whether someone gets tapped to be a



Chris Rock acted as host of the Academy Awards. (Andrew Eccles/ABC)

member of the Academy. The white experience, like any label that attempts to describe a group of people, is not monolithic. If a white Academy member has lived a life that’s made them sensitive to a marginalized group’s narrative, for e.g. women, the physically disabled, LGBTQ, mentally challenged, etc., and they want to bring this experience to the table and let it guide their decisions on which stories to shine a light on, then their voice is as urgently in need of being represented as that of any other racial minority. It’ll only help the movie industry to reach this level of inclusiveness.”

“I don’t think The Academy was even thinking about it because we have been invisible, the silent minority for a very long time,” wrote Long. “A more diverse demographic at the the Academy is a good thing. Like in the 1960s when desegregation took place and black

students were bussed into white schools. It might be odd at first but then it becomes and accepted part of life. And that's what it is really about, acceptance."

"Adding more Asian members to their board is basically what I suggested Fox News could have done to prevent the airing of their stereotyping segment. Like most anything, the Academy responds to the perception of demand – if enough people say something is a problem, then it becomes prudent to do something to address the problem, at least as a PR move," wrote Keodara. "Until that imaginary threshold of demand is reached, there is insufficient momentum to justify any dramatic change to the status quo. There is a feeling of safety in tradition, after all. Asians were seen as a safe bet. We supposedly don't speak up or yell or scream. Apparently, they haven't met Constance Wu or Ming-na Wen or Margaret Cho."

The addition of Asian voices to the table can only help Hollywood become a more perfect industry.

"For me, the biggest benefit of the Academy's diversity initiatives is that the industry sees they are taking action, and that this action is important, real, and not just talk. This has influence. Other organizations must follow," wrote Tashima. "Too many industry execs and other decision makers have viewed these issues as being "PC" or otherwise just a trend. They need to understand that it's the future of movies. It's real and if they don't get onboard, their movies will no longer be relevant to audiences."

"More Asian voices in the Academy means more value being put to films that portray Asian characters in a more versatile and meaningful range," wrote Keodara. "But Academy members do not dictate what films end up actually made nor who ends up in major roles. It's an important step, but just one among many."

Li said that more Asian members in the Academy can only mean more exposure in Hollywood, which can lead to more films and more opportunities for Asian actors.

"The people who are in the Academy, they have more access to the right talent, the right projects. ...If there are more Asian writers and directors doing Asian roles and producing Asian films, telling these stories, then there will be more shown on TV and

cinema," she said. "I think we need to be more practical on that, rather than saying, 'Oh, there are not enough roles.' We need to start doing things, making those films."

Many groups are fighting for equal representation in Hollywood. However, Hollywood regularly assumes that "diversity" and "representation" only equals "black." Of course, the fight for African American visibility has been a much longer, and much more intense fight, resulting in much ground being made over the years and much more content made by African Americans for African American (and general) audiences. Those interviewed in this project understand that the Asian American fight for visibility is still in its adolescence.

"The African American community in this country and in this Industry have been vocal much longer and louder than we or any other underrepresented group has been," wrote Long. "And because of that they have made deeper inroads. In addition to talent, that's what it takes."

Tashima and Wable agree.

"It's happening, but on a smaller scale, which is to be expected, in the sense that African-Americans are a larger population (and larger force) than Asian Americans. So there are more numbers, more stars, etc. And, I think it's important to differentiate from Asian (China, S. Korea, etc.) and Asian American," wrote Tashima. "There's a lot of talk about China, and all the dollars there, for ticket sales, production, etc. And we see stars from Asia placed in Hollywood movies, to pursue those dollars. What Asian American actors and filmmakers face is a different facet of the industry, more along the lines of indie filmmakers. It's hard to convince anyone of anything until there is an Asian American box office success, be it an actor, or film. We just have to keep producing, and I think the growth (in returns) will come."

"I think the same is happening for Asians but at a markedly slower pace. Part of the reason is the sheer numbers in play. Asian Americans that have endured and succeeded in this industry are few and far between on both the creative, and business side of things," wrote Wable. "The business aspect is really the driving factor that makes any production company viable so it's interesting that, for example, thriving film industries in our home regions such as Bollywood for India, and the Chinese film market., haven't translated

to a similar emergence of bigger production companies here that produce stories relevant to the Asian American demographic.”

“As an actor, I’ve noticed that Bollywood often comes out to the States to shoot their films, but the way distribution works and the politics of actors ‘crossing over’ to Hollywood has made it a very segregated business where a global pop star like Priyanka Chopra is absurdly ‘discovered’ by an American audience through [ABC’s] *Quantico*. Creators like Mindy Kaling, Aziz Ansari, and Eddie Huang have trail-blazed for us in terms of making space for our stories to be heard by mainstream American media so that’s the initial, and necessary, foundation that needed to be laid for established Asian American names on par with an Ava DuVernay to successfully cultivate their production companies.”

In contrast, Both Keodara and Sethi both think that the fight for Asian representation has barely even begun.

Keodara said that despite his belief that the battle for Asian American visibility hasn’t gotten to a

rolling start, “momentum is building.”

“Asian American actors have not yet been given the chance to achieve similar levels of box office draws based on name recognition alone and still seldom if ever given lead roles in budget busting Hollywood productions besides Lucy Liu,” he wrote. “The strides black actors and actresses have made in achieving name recognition and a legacy of a broad, nuanced range of characters have yet to be achieved by to the same degree by their Asian counterparts – Asian actors continue to be cast for either marital-arts-centric roles or comedic roles that frequently rely on Asian stereotypes for most of their jokes.”

“In order for change to occur, these safe stereotypes need to be replaced with risky unconventional portrayals that still meet the American demand for quality entertainment. But, if Hollywood isn’t willing, then we’ll have to take charge, which is why I started my company, Asian Entertainment Television, to be the vanguard.”

Sethi also wrote how content creation is the next step in Asian representation in Hollywood.



Priyanka Chopra as Alex Parrish (Craig Sjodin/ABC)



“I think we are still far from this happening within the Asian community, but we do need to start our own production houses and fund our own productions. This is definitely happening on an international level, but not quite in Hollywood just yet,” he wrote. “I think change will come from young filmmakers using their cameras and voices to bring about change through independent production.”

Jackson wrote about a space in which content creation is already happening at an exponential pace: the internet.

“Though the Asian acting community is relatively a lot smaller, I do see similar changes being attempted especially in the digital space. You have digital content creators like Anna Akana, Ryan Higa, and Wong Fu Productions producing their own content and telling their own stories which I think is great,” she wrote. “Justin Chon just wrote and directed his own feature film *Gook*, about two Korean-American brothers living amidst the 1992 LA riots. I think it’s so important for creators to tell their own stories. It’s accurate and authentic representation.”



Justin Chon in *Gook*.

I think it's so important for creators to tell their own stories. It's accurate and authentic representation.

-Asia Jackson



Kina Grannis and Harry Shum, Jr. in Wong Fu Production's *Single By 30*.

# WHAT HOLLYWOOD'S DOING RIGHT & WRONG

To paraphrase Lee, Hollywood once had the likes of James Shigeta, one of the few Asian American leading men in Hollywood. “Unfortunately,” he wrote, “no one has recently attained the level of stardom as James Shigeta since.”



*Fresh Off the Boat*, Season 1, (ABC)

Even still, while it might seem like there's not any movement being made in Hollywood in regards to Asian American exposure and representation, there's a lot of movement under the surface.

“I think film and television are two different beasts. I see lots of positive movement being made in television with the production of shows like *Fresh Off the Boat* and *Dr. Ken*,” wrote Jackson. “On the flip-side however, whitewashing is still very prevalent in films like *Doctor Strange*, *Ghost in the Shell*, and *Death Note*. I'm seeing more biracial and interracial relationship representation but again,

they're mostly black/white.”

“I see positive movement in the direction that we are now seeing ourselves on the big screen,” wrote Sethi. “I still feel we are far from representing our true identities but we are getting there.”

Keodara wrote that the progress is being hampered by what he called “bullshit excuses” from Hollywood execs. “There's been a modicum of a burgeoning positive representation of Asian representation on TV in Hollywood. Well, at least when it comes to *Fresh Off the Boat*. *Dr. Ken* still relies on stereotypes for laughs. Ken Jeong built a career on that,” he wrote.

“On the movie front, for as long as Hollywood has been in business, there has yet to be an Asian superhero. We still get bullshit excuses from Kevin Feig, Scott Derrickson and his minions about why they cast a white woman as a Tibetan man in *Doctor Strange*. It seems every week there is news coming out that another movie whitewashes Asian characters and it looks like things will get worst because now we have the Chinese trying to compete with Hollywood by casting white movie stars in Chinese productions, case in point *The Great Wall*.”

Wable, Tashima, and Long, however, are more optimistic.

“Absolutely,” wrote Wable in response to whether progress is being made in Hollywood. “I have already named some of the creative forces that are changing the way Asians are represented and I think there are more and more folks emerging who are self-aware of the kinds of stories they want to put out about Asians in this country. The positive movement for biracial movement is also there ...albeit markedly less pronounced[.]”

Tashima wrote that “just more awareness” is what’s needed to get the ball rolling. “More reaction to missteps, more protests,” he wrote. “And we have actors gaining success, which will make the difference. What has been lacking is opportunity (not talent). Opportunities are beginning to come more frequently, and at higher levels, and I think the success will follow, and that will build on itself.”

“Television is leaps and bounds ahead of the movie industry,” wrote Long. “It started with Sandra Oh in *Grey’s Anatomy* and continues with Steve Yuen in *The Walking Dead*. It’s getting better but it still has a ways to go.”

Li said that she “actually feel[s] quite positive” about the progress being made in the industry. But like others have stated, Li mentioned the importance of Asian creators making their own films while progress continues in Hollywood.

“I think [progress] is getting there. There’s more stories about Asians being told. Those are all [positive] steps ...I think we just need to keep making those films,” she said, adding that by 2017, China will be one of the biggest film markets.

Li said that during the time of our interview, she was

in the middle of making her own film in her home, the UK. She urged more creators to start making the films they want to see. “You can spend two years talking about it, or you can spend two years making a film, putting it into the cinema, and show it,” she said.

In terms of Hollywood’s casting practices, Li said that Asian characters in properties should remain Asian characters once they get to screen.

“Eventually, I would want everything to be colorblind casting. That’s the best. But at least represent [the characters correctly],” she said. “You see it’s an Asian character, stick with an Asian character. At least represent the geography. If there’s 30 percent of Asians, then there should be 30 percent of Asians shown on TV. ...That’s art imitating life.”



Steven Yeun as Glenn from *The Walking Dead*. (Gene Page/AMC)

On the movie front, for as long as Hollywood has been in business, there has yet to be an Asian superhero. We still get bullshit excuses from Kevin Feig, Scott Derrickson and his minions about why they cast a white woman as a Tibetan man in *Doctor Strange*.

-Sinakhone Keodara



# WHAT AUDIENCES NEED TO KNOW

*Ghost in the Shell* and *Doctor Strange* act as microcosms for everything discussed in this interview. Both films address two sides to the Asian representation issue; whitewashing and erasure. But while many have joined with Asian Americans in protesting these films, there are still many others who either don't understand the issues or feel like the outrage is a threat. For too many, the controversy surrounding these films is just "Social Justice Warrior" meddling.

The controversies are far from meddling; it's a call to action from a marginalized group to be represented accurately and with respect. For too long, that cry has gone unheard, but finally, and slowly, more and more ears are picking up on it. However, instead of a non-Asian voice summing up what the fight means to Asian Americans, here they are in their own words.

**Lee:** "The passion of fans come from the purest place. Listen to the fans. The fans bash Hollywood for whitewashing *The Last Air Bender* and *Ghost in the Shell*. Why doesn't Hollywood listen?"

**Jackson:** "I think some entertainment fans need to understand that not everyone is equally, accurately, and positively represented in media. Marginalized groups are always portrayed in stereotypical roles while white characters are allowed to be multi-dimensional protagonists. All we want is equal representation."

**Long:** "I can't speak for what any one takes away from a discussion. I only say *just keep having the discussion!*"

**Tashima:** "It's about race representation, and employment opportunity. Fairness, justice, and why racism and oppression onscreen is bad.

If you understand that, you'll see what should happen and what shouldn't. When you understand the issues, it's easier to see right from wrong. Balance is crucial. Stay away from thinking issues relate to artistic interpretation, artistic freedom, and those arguments which are a different topic. We all want those things. But, what else is going on? What is the history of oppression? What needs to be done to make change?"

**Wable:** "I think folks who have trouble understanding why (well-informed) representation of minority voices in entertainment matters, don't fully understand why entertainment and media generally matters. For most people, regardless of race/gender/sexual orientation, it wasn't until relatively recently that minority representation in media began to be talked about as an important socio-political issue that needed to be addressed.

Of course, there have always been activists of all walks of

who have recognized the issue and fought for fair representation, but I think for many people entertainment still remains just that- an idle pass-time that they assume, has no effect on how they perceive the world, when in fact, every image that flickers past their eyes and word that's uttered by someone on screen, is coloring the lens through which they view their fellow humans. So I think the real take away for entertainment fans is a question to reflect on- "How has/does entertainment inform my opinions about a given issue or group of people?"

"...I will leave it on a positive note by saying that I am optimistic. I think we live in such an exciting time given all the avenues for creators to find their audiences and I think it's a critical time for us to keep discussing these issues and, it's critical for creators and gatekeepers alike to be tuned in to these discussions because they are not only essential to the corporate interests that are interested in making money off of cutting-edge content, but the cutting edge content itself is how we will ultimately evolve into a more inclusive and humane society where our entertainment reflects the reality we live in and not the fears that produced it."

**Sethi:** "They need to understand that these are our stories, our culture and our community. We must protect these things because this is all we have."

"I truly feel that even the representation we have right now for Indian American actors on the big screen and TV is minimal and weird. It doesn't reflect my parents, me or my community. But seeing brown faces on the screen is definitely the first step. and there are a few actors out there that refuse to do the Indian accent and really are pushing the limits of how far we have seen brown faces succeed in this industry."

**Keodara:** "Misrepresentation and underrepresentation is a form of emotional and psychological violence against Asians. It's degrading and demeaning to be told that we're not Asian enough or good enough to portray ourselves in our own stories. What they need to understand is that characters can be made compelling to the American audience without relying on the actor's ethnicity. Even if you don't understand why we feel hurt by these portrayals, do try to understand that on a basic human level, our hurt is genuine and that we should all care for one another's pains and frustrations.

We are all Americans, and more importantly we are all human beings. Whatever our backgrounds, our ethnicities, our finances, our politics, we all feel fear, frustration, anxiety, worry, pain and isolation. No matter how we are colored, we all deserve the support and

consideration of one another." ♦

*The Blasian Project* and WGA comedy writer M. Hasna Maznavi were also reached for comment.



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