

The Cinematic Asian Prostitute
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Abstract

Images of the Asian prostitute capture many of the problematic stereotypes of Asian women: submissive, sexual commodities available for acquisition and consumption. This is not just a trope in American or western media, however. Many films with Chinese male directors include similar patterns and tropes of these prostitutes. Are these controlling images of Asian women via the prostitute part of a reflexive fetishization on the part of the Asian male directors? And how are the understandings and expectations of Asian women in each society influenced by these images? My research project seeks to unlock the answers to these crucial questions and venture answers as to how to minimize the creation and popularization of these problematic images.

Introduction

As a screenwriting major with minors in Chinese language and Asian and Pacific studies, I found myself drawn to explore how film influences cultural perceptions of Asian women. At first I looked into the perception of Asian female sexuality and the fetishization of Asian women.

Looking at the portrayals of Asian women in western, English-speaking media, I stumbled along a specific stereotype that seemed to span both time and genre: the prostitute. This trope neatly packages many problematic stereotypes of Asian women: beautiful, sultry, exotic, obedient females. The stereotype distills all these into a palatable, even pleasing, cinematic cliché: the oriental woman whose worth trends more to her value as a commodity than a person. After pinpointing this trope, I realized it was connected to a larger pattern of western portrayals of Asia, both cinematic and in other mediums. This western idea of Asian women is part of the mythology of Orientalism, a term coined and defined by scholar and professor Edward Said to talk about colonialism and its resulting repercussions (Burney). Orientalism is not a new concept nor solely confined to cinema: it is a long practice of the western world defining the eastern world as the “Orient” and asserting authority over it by way of characterizing it through controlling images. I believe the image of the Asiatic prostitute is a crucial image for understanding the gendered implications of Orientalism on western and American media. But Orientalism is not an isolated phenomenon. It can be internalized by colonized peoples or other peoples who have come into contact with Orientalizing westerners. This is referred to as “re-Orientalism” or “self-Orientalism” (Lau). I will refer to it as self-Orientalism in this proposal. I am interested in investigating the intersections and implications of both Orientalism and self-Orientalism on the image of the Asian prostitute. I have chosen to investigate that by looking specifically at Chinese and western (specifically American or British) films to answer the question: how do Chinese and English-speaking cinemas differ in their portrayals of the Asian female prostitute? I hope to obtain a better understanding of Orientalism and self-Orientalism and the specific way they manifest themselves in the contexts of gender and women.

Background/Related Work

The image of the Asian female prostitute and the specific mythology of that trope are not limited to cinema. They had an established place in western perceptions and portrayals of the “Far East” before films existed, and continue to maintain a foothold in American perceptions of Asia outside of film (Sheridan). However, as video has risen as in its popularity and reach over the last century, Orientalism has garnered a strong foothold in film. The ability of movies to portray a cinematic world that seemingly transports the viewer into its diegetic universe helps the tropes espoused by Orientalist understandings of Asia gain authority. I want to specifically examine the way this cinematic image has been shaped by Orientalism and self-Orientalism, and in turn shaped American and Chinese understandings of Asian women.

This trope appears in indie films and blockbusters. I first encountered it while researching Asian female sexuality and subjugation in opposition to the white male savior—an earlier version of an idea for this research project. I watched two very different movies: *The Flowers of War* (2012) and *Chinese Box* (1997). One is a nearly 100-million dollar blockbuster

with a highly dramatized plot of a brothel that seeks shelter in a church during the Rape of Nanking (Nanjing), while the other is a small indie film that focuses on a journalist in Hong Kong during the handover. Yet both films' portrayals of Asian prostitutes track to some very similar basic traits: women defined by their fiery sexualities, submissive natures, conniving minds and desirable bodies. Most of all, they embody the problematic stereotype of Asian women as commodities: objects rather than people. Upon researching this further, I found these tropes stretching across not only genre but also time. *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) has been one of the defining films that Asian- and Asian-American cinematic critics focus on for decades, for its exoticized portrayal of a feisty prostitute in 1960s Hong Kong. This early western cinematic portrayal of the Asian female prostitute is countered by an earlier Chinese one. I discovered the 1930s silent film *The Goddess* (1934), a story of a woman forced to walk the streets to support her young son's education. This film provided a dimensional portrayal of a prostitute and uniquely criticized the society that put her in this position and then rejected her for its stigma. The unnamed Goddess in the film lacked the fiery sexuality and the submissiveness of later renditions of this trope that I studied. I wonder how much of this is due to the west's increasing influence on what was in the 1930s just a burgeoning Chinese cinema.

In researching these Orientalist perceptions of Asian female prostitutes, I'm interested in how these tropes manifest themselves in modern life and understandings of Asian women. I want to use my research to explore the Orientalist trope of the Asiatic prostitute and stereotypes of Asian female sexuality, and probe into potential real-world implications this phenomenon of socially perpetuated stereotypes may have. I hope to supplement this analysis with the intersectional lenses of ethnicity- and class- driven analysis to strengthen my research and help me focus in formulating an answer to my question. I believe there's a vicious connection between perceptions of Asian women and Asian female sexuality that transform into stereotypes which then make their way into popular culture, which then have real-world social (and political) implications.

If this vicious cycle is not limited to western understandings of Asian women (which my early research and the fact that many of the films on my current filmography roster are directed by Asian men do indicate), I'm curious to see how this fetishization of the Oriental prostitute has manifested itself with Chinese film. This may be a result of self-Orientalism or a specific intersection of self-Orientalism and gender. Have the power dynamics of Orientalism shaped a national Chinese cinema dependent on Orientalist portrayals of Chinese women for profit? Are these Chinese male directors liberating male characters from the shadow of Orientalism at the expense of female characters, or is self-Orientalism as a whole profitable?

Methods

Orientalism is no small issue, and is not easily solved. Its ripple effect and manifestation in Chinese self-Orientalism is also a difficult issue. However, I hope to make an impact in the understandings of Chinese cinemas by bringing light to self-Orientalism and its role in the specific gendered contexts of portrayals of the female Asian prostitute.

The cultural stereotypes of Asian women so well distilled in the imagery and mythology of the Asian prostitute have permeated many aspects of American understandings of Asian

women. Have they permeated the Chinese understandings of Asian women as well? Are the Chinese expectations of female behavior colored by this prevalent stereotype?

I want to research this topic, hopefully looking into more female-driven filmography to see if gender is indeed a factor of how women are portrayed in self-Orientalist films. Is the problem that the recent push for diversity and inclusion in front of the camera has not been mirrored behind the camera as strongly? How does this push for diversity play out in Chinese cinema/is there a comparable movement? And does this gendered self-Orientalist impulse manifest itself only in the work of Chinese male directors?

Expected Results

My work should track both American/English-speaking and Chinese film representations of Asian female prostitutes. Do these cinematic tropes influence disparate cultural understandings of Asian women? If so, how does this manifest itself in separate expectations of behavior from Asian females? Moreover, what could be a suggested solution? Is diversity and representation behind the camera the answer? I hope to come up with definitive answers to the multitude of questions I've struck upon during the beginning phases of this research project.

Conclusion

The prostitute is one conveniently succinct trope that represents many of the ways Asian women are fetishized and stereotyped in film and media. But looking beyond that, what is the driving force behind these tropes that are represented in American and Chinese cinemas? I want to investigate the role of gender in self-Orientalism, and determine whether the prostitute is a controlling image for understandings and expectations of Asian women in both cultures on which I'm specifically focusing.

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Necessary Resources

My resources will be primarily focused around obtaining less widely distributed films to help in my research, as well as some difficult-to-find books and journal subscriptions. I estimate that the cost for acquiring these films, including but not limited to *Pavilion of Women* and *The Main Attraction*, will be at maximum \$100, with an extra \$10 for shipping. Meanwhile, the cost for the books and journal subscriptions I want to acquire will fall around \$150-200.

The main cost of my research, at least that I foresee at the moment, will be my own labor. I estimate that between watching and taking notes on the movies, my time spent on films will total around 36-60 hours. Ideally, in film theory, a film should be watched at least 3 times before attempting to fully grasp and form an original analysis of it. At the average length of a film being 2 hours (sometimes more, almost 2 and a half for *The Flowers of War*, and sometimes less, under an hour and a half for *The Goddess*), this will work out to watching 6-10 films three times through.

Meanwhile, my time spent doing outside research and writing will total around 45-60 hours. It takes me on average an hour to read and take notes on an article, and two hours to put in in specific conversation with the films I want to analyze. I plan to review between 15-20 articles for this research project. At the standard wage for campus work, which is \$14 an hour, this totals out to land between \$1134-1680 for labor, with a total of between \$1394-1990 for net cost.