

Effects of Representation and Misrepresentation of Asian American Buddhists in Film

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Abstract

For decades, Asian American Buddhists have faced discrimination within America based on how they practice and how they look. Within American Buddhist *sanghas* many Asian Americans have felt excluded despite having strong ties to Buddhism or even having practiced the religion their whole lives. Part of the problem behind why this happens is due to how Buddhists of color are represented in media but specifically in film. Films offer insight into different worlds and lives and if it is done well people can learn from it but if it is done poorly, the effects can be extremely negative. Throughout the years Buddhists of color have been represented well and also represented poorly in film which has contributed to the perception of Asian American Buddhists in many ways. How exactly their perception has been impacted is what this research aims to find.

Introduction

As the film industry continues to grow in genre and content so does the representation that is available. New films are being written everyday with new stories and new characters that can change someone's perspective of the world and the people around them. Negative representation within films "can induce negative attitudes about individuals from those groups and can confirm negative stereotypes."¹ In turn, the opposite (positive representation) can help positively contribute to "how individuals view themselves and how other group's view [minority groups]."² The connections between representation in film and general perceptions of specific communities and populations can help reveal the realities that many underrepresented groups face. With these realities exposed, further work can be done to make positive change. The stories and realities of Asian American Buddhists that Chenxing Han tells in *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists* reveal how Asian American Buddhists have repeatedly been discriminated against and excluded from predominantly white Buddhist spaces. In analyzing how films represent Buddhism, this research will reveal the connections between how Asian American Buddhists are perceived in America due to how they are portrayed on screen and how that affects and impacts their lives.

Background, Related Work and Motivation

Chenxing Han's *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists* in addition to the works of Kenneth Tanaka on privatized religion and the works by David Forbes and Jeff

¹ Besana, Tiffany, Dalal Katsiaficas, and Aerika Brittian Loyd. "Asian American media representation: A film analysis and implications for identity development." *Research in Human Development* 16, no. 3-4 (2019): 201-225, 203

² Besana, 201

Wilson on mindfulness in America have provided the foundation and background for this research's focus on the exclusion and mistreatment of Asian American Buddhists. Chenxing Han's *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists* is a groundbreaking study of the lived reality of Buddhism in America that highlights stories and experiences of Asian American Buddhists of all ages and backgrounds. Using their stories, Han brings the realities they face as Buddhists of color in often predominantly white American Buddhist spaces to light. By telling their stories, Han also highlights the importance of listening to the voices of those being impacted, especially when that impact is negative. These negative impacts were brought further into light through Forbes³ and Wilson's⁴ work on mindfulness, which exposed the harmful effects of white Americans taking Buddhist practices and stripping them of their authenticity and history to market and sell them as their own. These works in relation to Tanaka's discussion of whether the privatization of religion has undermined Buddhist authenticity revealed the close connection that authenticity and inclusivity have.⁵ Collectively, these works lead to the finding that inclusivity requires authenticity. One of the spaces where we might test the level of authenticity is to address representation in film and specifically how Asian Americans respond to the representation of Asian Americans in popular media. Jane Naomi Iwamura's *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* and Sharon A.

³ Forbes, David. *Mindfulness and Its Discontents: Education, Self, and Social Transformation*. Fernwood Publishing, 2019.

⁴ Wilson, Jeff. *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

⁵ Tanaka, Kenneth K. "The individual in relation to the Sangha in American Buddhism: an examination of" privatized religion"." *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 27 (2007): 115-127.

Suh's *Silver Screen Buddha: Buddhism in Asian and Western Film* discuss the inauthentic and problematic portrayals of Buddhism that have persisted in the film industry for decades. Their work has helped reveal the issues of misrepresentation of Buddhism in film which has provided the background for this research's discussion of Buddhism specifically in film. In analyzing how and if films are utilizing authentic Buddhist representation, we can see how they are contributing to not just inclusivity in America but the overall perception of Asian American Buddhists. In researching how authentic films are to the Asian American Buddhist experience, the conversation on inclusivity in the film industry can be furthered and positively changed to better the general perception of Asian American Buddhists.

Methods

To find how representation in film has affected the general perception of Asian American Buddhists in America the first part of this research will include analysis of ten different films that all portray Buddhism in different ways. John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff's *Buddhism and American Cinema* discuss the various ways to analyze Buddhism and film and provided the background necessary for this research to find and understand how Buddhism is utilized in film and how it may be viewed through different lenses. Analysis of these films will include focuses on how the characters play into stereotypes, how Buddhism is interacted with by different characters in the films, and how the film's concluding message influences the audience's understanding of Buddhism. Films to analyze include:

1. *Heaven and Earth*
2. *Lost in Translation*
3. *The Last Airbender*
4. *The Matrix*

5. *Fight Club*
6. *Seven Years in Tibet*
7. *Star Wars: A New Hope*
8. *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter...and Spring*
9. *Little Buddha*
10. *The Big Lebowski*

Each of these films contain either Buddhist traditions, practices, or characters that contribute to the overall perception of Asian American Buddhists. How these films represent Buddhists and Buddhism will provide insight into how Buddhism is portrayed in media which will then give insight into how audiences may view Asian American Buddhists.

The second part of this research will include interviews with Asian American Buddhists. As seen with Chenxing Han's *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists*, listening to the voices of those impacted provides further insight into the realities they face and what needs to be done to improve those realities. The findings from the ten films will be narrowed down to two films; one that is problematic in its representation, and one that is more uplifting in its representation of Asian American Buddhists. Then, after contacting a local Buddhist Temple in Los Angeles, screenings of the two films will be held and stipends will be offered for individuals, specifically Asian American Buddhists, who will be asked to participate in watching the two films and a discussion afterwards. The discussion will include guiding questions asking about how they felt about the films and their thoughts on how Buddhism was portrayed. The amount of people participating will vary but will be within a range of twenty to fifty people. In comparing how films portray Asian American Buddhists and how Asian American Buddhists

feel about those films, conclusive connections can be made about not just how these films have impacted Asian American Buddhists but also why they have impacted them so.

Expected Results

The expected results of this research will be that misrepresentation has negatively affected how Asian American Buddhists are perceived and impacted. In seeing how misrepresentation has negatively affected Asian Americans,⁶ it seems that the same would be true for Asian American Buddhists. Representation in film is important to how we view ourselves⁷ and if that representation is negative, inaccurate, and inauthentic, then it would be expected that one's view of oneself would not be positive or uplifting. It is also expected that inaccuracies in representation contribute to a negative perception of Asian American Buddhists and that accurate representation contributes positively and uplifts Asian American Buddhists. Ultimately, it is expected that this research will find that better representation is needed overall. Through the discussion with Asian American Buddhists after the film screenings it is expected that there will be calls for better representation in film and also calls for more representation in film. Chenxing Han's *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists* makes it clear that many Asian American Buddhists are unhappy with how they are perceived and treated in America. In seeing how important consumerism and media is to individuals in the West through Cusack's *The Western Reception of Buddhism: Celebrity and Popular Cultural Media as Agents of Familiarisation*, it is expected that misrepresentation in film and the negative perception of Asian American Buddhists would be closely linked.

⁶ Besana, 204

⁷ Besana, 201

Conclusion

Buddhism, its traditions, and those who practice have been portrayed in film for decades. This research aims to reveal the impact that films representing Asian American Buddhists and Buddhist practices has had on the community and overall perception of Asian American Buddhists. This research will begin by analyzing ten different films that utilize Buddhist characters and/or Buddhist traditions and practices. The analysis will reveal either positive or negative representation of Buddhism which will then inform the decision for the two films chosen to screen and help lead discussion with Asian American Buddhists. This discussion will bring their stories and experiences to light which will then contribute to the findings of the previous analysis and help contextualize the impact that these films have on Asian American Buddhists. These findings will help contribute to future discussions surrounding representation and authenticity in the film industry which will hopefully lead to overall better on-screen portrayal of Buddhism and Asian American Buddhists.

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Budget

Item/Description	Price
Stipends for discussion participants	\$2500 (\$50 per participant, maximum 50)
Ten Films	\$150
Minimum Wage	\$755 (\$16.04 LA minimum wage x 47 hours)

Total Cost: \$3,405

Timeline

Week	Description	Hours
1	Watch the first set of five films and analyze	15
2	Watch the second set of five films and analyze	15
3	Hold film screening and lead discussion	12
4	Analyze and finalize results	5