



THE CHINESE DIASPORA ON AMERICAN SCREENS

== *Race, Sex, and Cinema* ==

Gina Marchetti



Gina Marchetti

The Chinese Diaspora on American Screens

Race, Sex, and Cinema



TEMPLE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Philadelphia

TEMPLE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19122
www.temple.edu/tempress

Copyright © 2012 by Temple University
All rights reserved
Published 2012

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Marchetti, Gina.

The Chinese diaspora on American screens : race, sex, and cinema / Gina Marchetti.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-59213-518-9 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-59213-520-2 (e-book)

1. Chinese in motion pictures. 2. Race in motion pictures. 3. Sex role in motion pictures. 4. Motion pictures—United States—History. I. Title.

PN1995.9.C48M37 2012

791.43'6552—dc23

2011040722

Printed in the United States of America

060812P

The Chinese Diaspora on American Screens

Acknowledgments

I would particularly like to thank my editor, Micah Kleit, for his support of this project and commitment to research on Asian American cinema. Given that studies of the Asian diaspora on American screens are just emerging, it is a tribute to Micah's vision that he is willing to develop this area for Temple University Press.

I am very grateful for the support of my colleagues at the University of Hong Kong, particularly Esther Cheung, Esther Yau, Mirana Szeto, Fiona Law, Sebastian Veg, Nancy Tong, and Staci Ford. It is always inspiring to be around such lively intellects. It is stimulating, too, to be surrounded by wonderful students such as Amy Lee, Lin Yiping, Jason Ho, Derek Lam, Sebastian Yim, Vivian Au, Xavier Tam, Ma Ran, and Mercedes Vázquez.

Frances Gateward, Amy Villarejo, Song Hwee Lim, Julian Ward, Daniel Bernardi, Darrell Y. Hamamoto, Helen Lee, Chris Holmlund, and Murray Pomerance all provided valuable assistance at various points.

Special thanks go to Fanny Chan, Natalie Siu Lam Wong, and Lin Yiping for their invaluable help putting this book together.

I could never have finished this book without the loving kindness of my husband, Cao Dongqing, and son, Luca Cao.

A portion of the research for this book came from the Seed Funding Program for Basic Research, University of Hong Kong. I am very grateful to Leon Hunt of Brunel University for chatting with me about the reception of *Rush Hour 3* in England. I am also thankful for the help of my editors at *Hong Kong Cinemagic*, Thomas Podvin and David Vivier, for their thoughts on Jackie Chan in diaspora. Other support came from GRF Incentive Awards 2009–10 and 2010–11, University Research Committee, University of Hong Kong.

A few passages of Chapter 1 were originally published in Gina Marchetti, "Cinemas of the Chinese Diaspora," in *The Chinese Cinema Book*, edited by Song Hwee Lim and Julian Ward, 26–34 (London: British Film Institute/Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

Portions of Chapter 2 were originally published in Gina Marchetti, "Jackie Chan and the Black Connection," in *Keyframes: Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies*, edited by Matthew Tinkcom and Amy Villarejo, 137–158 (London: Routledge, 2001).

Chapter 3 was originally published in Gina Marchetti, "Romeo Must Die: Interracial Romance in Action," in *The Persistence of Whiteness: Race and Contemporary Hollywood Cinema*, edited by Daniel Bernardi, 253–266 (London: Routledge, 2007).

Some portions of Chapter 5 were originally published in Gina Marchetti, "The Wedding Banquet: Global Chinese Cinema and the Asian American Experience," in *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism*, edited by Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Liu, 275–297 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000); and Gina Marchetti, "Still Looking: Negotiating Race, Sex, and History in *Dirty Laundry*," in *Like Mangoes in July: The Work of Richard Fung*, edited by Helen Lee and Kerri Sakamoto, 80–89 (Toronto: Insomniac/Images Festival, 2002).

Some material in Chapter 6 was previously published in Gina Marchetti, "Guests at *The Wedding Banquet*: The Cinema of the Chinese Diaspora and the Rise of the American Independents," in *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, edited by Chris Holmlund and Justin Wyatt, 211–225 (London: Routledge, 2005).

Chapter 7 was originally published in Gina Marchetti, "Pursuits of Hapiness: Kip Fulbeck's Boyhood among Ghosts," in *Where the Boys Are: Cinemas of Masculinity and Youth*, edited by Murray Pomerance and Frances Gateward, 279–296 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005).

Contents

List of Illustrations	vii
Acknowledgments	xi
1 Introduction: Race, Sex, and the Chinese Diaspora in American Film	1
PART I In the Black Pacific	
2 Jackie Chan's Black Connections	19
Interview: Jeff Yang	59
3 Interracial Romance in Action: <i>Romeo Must Die</i>	66
4 Black in the Chinese Diaspora: Double-Consciousness in Yvonne Welbon's <i>Remembering Wei Yi-fang</i> , <i>Remembering Myself</i>	80
Interview: Yvonne Welbon	97
PART II Sex, Gender, and Generation in Diaspora	
5 Queering the Patriarchy: <i>The Wedding Banquet</i> , <i>Toc Storee</i> , and <i>Dirty Laundry</i>	105
Interview: Richard Fung	139
6 Guests at the Wedding Banquet: <i>The Joy Luck Club</i> , <i>Double Happiness</i> , <i>Siao Yu</i> , and <i>Shopping for Fangs</i>	144
Interview: Wayne Wang	168

7	In Pursuit of Video Hapa-ness: <i>Banana Split</i> and Kip Fulbeck's Boyhood among Ghosts	172
	Interview: Kip Fulbeck	188
8	Conclusion: Screening the Chinese Diaspora in the New Millennium	194
	Appendix: Filmography	201
	Notes	205
	Bibliography	227
	Index	239

List of Illustrations

1.1 Scene from <i>Hollywood Chinese</i> (2007).	6
1.2 Bruce Lee as Tang Lung (a.k.a. Dragon) in <i>Return of the Dragon/Way of the Dragon</i> (1972).	7
1.3 Wood Moy as Jo in <i>Chan Is Missing</i> (1982).	10
1.4 Sihung Lung as Mr. Chu and Deb Snyder as Martha Chu in <i>Pushing Hands</i> (1992).	13
2.1 Still from <i>Enter the Dragon</i> (1973).	22
2.2 Still from <i>Armor of God</i> (1987).	23
2.3 Jackie Chan as Keung in <i>Rumble in the Bronx</i> (1995).	31
2.4 Jackie Chan as Inspector Lee and Chris Tucker as James Carter in <i>Rush Hour</i> (1998).	38
2.5 Jackie Chan as Whoami in <i>Who Am I?</i> (1998).	39
2.6 Jackie Chan as Mr. Han and Jaden Smith as Dre Parker in <i>The Karate Kid</i> (2010).	41
2.7 Jackie Chan as Mr. Han teaching martial arts to Jaden Smith as Dre Parker in <i>The Karate Kid</i> (2010).	41
2.8 Zhang Ziyi as Hu Li in <i>Rush Hour 2</i> (2001).	47
2.9 Jackie Chan as Inspector Lee and Chris Tucker as James Carter in <i>Rush Hour 2</i> (2001).	51

2.10	Chris Tucker as Carter watches <i>Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom</i> in <i>Rush Hour 3</i> (2007).	52
2.11	Jackie Chan as Lee chooses to watch a documentary on Africa in <i>Rush Hour 3</i> (2007).	52
2.12	Roman Polanski as Detective Revi in <i>Rush Hour 3</i> (2007).	55
3.1	Jet Li as Han Sing dancing with Aaliyah as Trish O'Day in Silk's casino in <i>Romeo Must Die</i> (2000).	71
3.2	Jet Li as Han Sing and Aaliyah as Trish O'Day in <i>Romeo Must Die</i> (2000).	71
3.3	Jet Li as Han Sing and Isaiah Washington as Mac in <i>Romeo Must Die</i> (2000).	76
3.4	O'Day's gang has a rematch with Jet Li as Han Sing in the park in <i>Romeo Must Die</i> (2000).	77
5.1	Still from <i>Dirty Laundry</i> (1996).	109
5.2	The family and wedding party in <i>The Wedding Banquet</i> (1993).	110
5.3	Lung Sihung as Mr. Gao and Winston Chao as Wai-tung in <i>The Wedding Banquet</i> (1993).	114
5.4	Kuei Ya-lei as Mrs. Gao and Winston Chao as Wai-tung in <i>The Wedding Banquet</i> (1993).	119
5.5	Winston Chao as Wai-tung, May Chin as Wei-wei, Kuei Ya-lei as Mrs. Gao, and Lung Sihung as Mr. Gao in <i>The Wedding Banquet</i> (1993).	120
5.6	The family looks through the wedding album in <i>The Wedding Banquet</i> (1993).	121
5.7	Wedding photo album in <i>The Wedding Banquet</i> (1993).	122
5.8	May Chin as Wei-wei in <i>The Wedding Banquet</i> (1993).	125
5.9	Mitchell Lichtenstein as Simon and Lung Sihung as Mr. Gao in <i>The Wedding Banquet</i> (1993).	129
5.10	Video still with subtitle from <i>Toc Storee</i> (1992).	135
5.11	Video still from <i>Toc Storee</i> (1992).	136
6.1	Tsai Chin as Lindo Jong and Christopher Rich as Rich in <i>The Joy Luck Club</i> (1993).	148

6.2 Daniel J. Travanti as Mario Moretti talking to Rene Liu as Siao Yu in <i>Siao Yu</i> (1995).	148
6.3 Still from <i>Siao Yu</i> (1995).	152
6.4 Daniel J. Travanti as Mario Moretti and Rene Liu as Siao Yu sharing a meal in <i>Siao Yu</i> (1995).	153
6.5 Rene Liu as Siao Yu sits with Daniel J. Travanti as Mario Moretti in <i>Siao Yu</i> (1995).	153
6.6 Jeanne Chinn as Trinh in <i>Shopping for Fangs</i> (1997).	158
6.7 Jeanne Chinn as Trinh and John Cho as Clarence in <i>Shopping for Fangs</i> (1997).	159
6.8 Still from <i>Shopping for Fangs</i> (1997).	159
6.9 Sandra Oh as Jade Li in <i>Double Happiness</i> (1994).	163
6.10 Jade Li's photo in the hands of a potential employer in <i>Double Happiness</i> (1994).	164
7.1 Still from <i>Banana Split</i> (1991).	174
8.1 Vivian Wu as Madame Chiang Kai-shek/Soong May-ling passes an African American soldier, who makes a catcall to indicate that he finds her sexy in <i>The Founding of a Republic</i> (2009).	199
8.2 The African American soldier in <i>The Founding of a Republic</i> (2009).	200

Introduction

Race, Sex, and the Chinese Diaspora in American Film

The *Chinese Diaspora on American Screens: Race, Sex, and Cinema* looks at issues of race and sexuality as central concerns in cinema generated by and about Chinese communities in America from the mid-1990s to the present. Examining media works from the United States and Canada as well as transnational coproductions, the book ventures beyond commercial cinema to explore documentaries, experimental films, and hybrid and digital forms that use different aesthetic idioms to discuss the Chinese experience in America. Interspersed with chapters focusing on the textual analysis of specific films are interviews with filmmakers, authors, and others involved in Chinese American screen culture.

The chapters that follow highlight the depiction of the Chinese in American cinema in relation to the multiethnic, multiracial, multicultural mix that defines the Asian experience in diaspora. The focus herein, then, is not on the ethnic Chinese in isolation but rather on how film depicts Chinese people in relation to other ethnic, racial, and sexual minorities. As I point out in *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction*,¹ since the silent era the American commercial film industry has been enthralled by stories involving interracial romance. While maintaining a gender-racial hierarchy with white, Anglo-American men firmly at the top, these films contain contradictory sentiments about race, gender, and sexuality that question the neat division of the races and the assumption of male dominance in America.

In the wake of the civil rights movement and the changes in immigration laws in the 1960s, filmmakers began to explore the role of Asian Americans in the United States in more nuanced ways. With the concomitant growth of

American independent film and Asian American cinema, space began to open for new voices on Chinese America to emerge on-screen. Many of these filmmakers returned to the topic of interracial relations but from a distinctly different perspective. Aligned with the characteristics of what Hamid Naficy might call an “accented cinema,”² these screen depictions provide a very different view of what it means to be Chinese in America. The heterosexual norms associated with the Hollywood romance find a queer expression in stories from the Chinese diaspora. The rigid rules governing the depiction of Hollywood’s idea of the Confucian patriarchal family break down as Chinese families mutate to include not only interracial branches and LGBT and queer relations but also ties to other places, from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to Europe, Australia, the Caribbean, and Latin America. The European-Asian binary for example, opens up to the very different relationship between African Americans and the Chinese community. The separation between the black-white dyad and the Chinese community has collapsed, and historical bonds forged during the civil rights era reemerge on-screen as mainstream hits rather than ghettoized “cult” favorites.

Hollywood’s global domination may be undisputed, but it does not continue without economic, aesthetic, and ideological competition. From the rise of the American independents to the continuing global importance of European art cinema, world screens accommodate more than commercial fare, and to stay viable, Hollywood relentlessly seeks new markets, larger audiences, and reliable profits. It seems far from coincidental that Hollywood’s support for Chinese filmmakers and performers such as Ang Lee, Jet Li, Jackie Chan, Chow Yun-Fat, and John Woo should coincide with the opening of the Mainland Chinese market to more coproductions and modest increases in non-Chinese movie screenings. Ironically, these filmmakers with transnational connections see Hollywood as a way out of what may be a politically and/or economically uncertain future in Hong Kong, Taiwan, or the PRC. Following the same economic and political vicissitudes that sent them to Hollywood in the 1990s, some in this cohort have returned to Asia to take advantage of growing opportunities for coproductions between Hong Kong and the PRC.

As I point out in my book *From Tian’anmen to Times Square: Transnational China and the Chinese Diaspora on Global Screens, 1989–1997*,³ the 1989 suppression of the protests in Beijing fueled the Chinese diaspora and inspired many filmmakers to look at global Chinese politics more critically. The period from the mid-1990s to the early years of the twenty-first century has been marked by enormous political, social, economic, and cultural transformations that have had a tremendous impact on the film culture of global China as well as on Hollywood, Asian American, and Chinese diasporic/nomadic filmmakers. Momentous changes gripped the Chinese globally. The Deng era ended, the Guomindang (KMT) lost power and regained it in Taiwan, Hong Kong began to adjust to its new status as a special administrative region (SAR) under Tung Chee-Hwa and later Donald Tsang, and the circulation of ethnic Chi-

nese around the world continued. The Asian financial crisis of 1997 sent many of the economies of the region into a downward spiral, with unemployment figures reaching new highs in places like Singapore and Hong Kong, and the banking “tsunami” of 2008 continues to trouble the recovering region.

As the PRC entered the World Trade Organization and hosted the 2008 Olympics in Beijing and Shanghai’s 2010 World Expo, new pressures came to bear on its human rights record, labor practices, and legal structures. Its continued economic growth occasioned more pronounced class divisions, elevated crime levels, labor exploitation, and social malaise. The severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) crisis highlighted this negative side to social change by underscoring the lack of communication between the PRC and the rest of Greater China (particularly Taiwan), the failure of a transnational Chinese public sphere to deal adequately with a life-threatening situation, the decay of the public health system and social services in an increasingly privatized Chinese economy, and the fragile nature of the economic and personal ties that make up global China.

While the forces of globalization gave rise to economic and social crises during this period, transnational contacts also enabled certain segments of the ethnic Chinese community to cross borders in order to advocate for political reform, social change, or cultural innovation. The importance of these lines of communication for feminist and queer communities within the Chinese-speaking world became more pronounced, with increased World Wide Web presence; more Internet contacts; and the growing transnational circulation of DVDs, VCDs, and other digital video materials. Chinese youth continued to take advantage of the wealth of options open to them to craft an identity distinct from the values and sense of self associated with their parents. The Chinese cultural sphere expanded and influenced other global culture industries—most notably, Hollywood—and increasingly porous cultural borders created enormous changes within American and international screen culture, from art cinema to mass commercial forms. However, the legacy of colonialism, racism, and class antagonisms continued to be seen in America and elsewhere.

The chill of the “war on terror” has dramatically changed the world since 9/11, updating geopolitical configurations after the end of the Cold War. It makes sense, then, that one of the first responses to 9/11 from Chinese film culture should come from Evans Chan, a diasporic independent filmmaker who is based in New York City and Hong Kong. *Bauhinia* (2002) tells the story of a young Chinese film student contemplating an abortion while making a documentary about the PRC’s one-child policy. During filming, the airplanes struck the World Trade Center, and Chan incorporated 9/11 into the narrative, skewing the story away from the PRC’s policies into a contemplation of personal security, political responsibility, and another consideration of the meaning of “human rights.” Although Chan sees the film as an “elegy” to the victims and survivors,⁴ it depicts the escalation of anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric

in America, and subsequent films involving the Chinese diaspora consider this as well (see Chapter 2).

Ethnic Chinese filmmakers and performers may command a more prominent place on American screens in recent years, but they still face ethnic marginalization, racist ghettoization, and limitations based on gender and sexual orientation. However, in the digital age, screen cultures have expanded, and there has also been an explosion of minority voices on smaller video, computer, and mobile phone screens. Taking this motion picture presence into account, this book moves from Hollywood star vehicles and transnational coproductions to Asian American independent features and experimental shorts. The Chinese on American screens, then, inhabit a liminal space between Hollywood's response to the "rise of China" and the changing face of Chinese America, transformed by newer immigrants, so-called "flexible citizens,"⁵ and closer ties to other places in the Chinese diaspora no longer cordoned off by Cold War hostilities. Chinese American filmmakers trace their ancestry in America, claim their stake in America as a new homeland, or take pride in their ability to hover between countries without committing to specific ethnic or national identities. Generational and gender differences meet with a range of sexual orientations, class positions, educational levels, and personal ambitions.

Moving from notions of the representation of the Chinese on Hollywood screens to the power of Chinese Americans to craft their own images outside the commercial system requires an understanding of the various ways the ethnic Chinese in America position themselves within a wider diasporic experience. The concept of "diaspora" now extends beyond the biblical dispersal of the Jewish people after the conquest of Israel to include various scatterings of people who may not maintain the longing to return to the homeland of the exile or the dream of assimilation of the immigrant. Because of race, ethnicity, language, religion, or other differences, those in diaspora cultivate a distinct identity and may have closer ties with other, similar communities around the world than with any "homeland." In fact, they may be multiple émigrés, moving from Mainland China, for example, to colonial Hong Kong or Malaya and on to the Caribbean or Canada over generations before settling, for the present, in America.

Within diaspora, identity becomes an issue (and sometimes a burden). The same filmmaker, performer, or fictional character may be, at various points, a Chinese exile, a Hong Kong émigré, an American immigrant, a mainlander, a Taiwanese, a Cantonese speaker, a Mandarin speaker, a Hokkien speaker, a Hakka or non-Han Chinese, a sojourner, a citizen or naturalized citizen, an overseas Chinese, a Chinese American, an Asian American, a "majority" Han, or a "minority" from elsewhere. Ties to China may be strong, weak, or broken. Connections to established Chinatowns may be essential to survival or non-existent. Extended families may remain in China or be scattered around Southeast Asia or be relocated elsewhere on the planet. Within the Chinese diaspora, various dialects of Chinese may or may not be spoken, and films may or may

not be in English or Chinese. Diasporic filmmakers may take up ethnic Chinese subject matter or ignore it or do both (e.g., Ang Lee, Wayne Wang). This book reflects these differences, multiple identities, and varied approaches to looking at the diasporic Chinese on American screens.

Although Shu-mei Shih makes a strong argument for turning away from the notion of the “diaspora” in favor of the “Sinophone,” the focus here remains on the more linguistically nebulous category of the “diasporic.” However, it seems important to remember, as Shih reminds us, that diaspora should have an expiration or “end date.” She notes, “Everyone should be given the chance to become local.”⁶ However, as the chapters that follow indicate, that process has been a particularly long one for many Chinese Americans. Shih’s decoupling of place of residence from ancestral origins opens up the study of the Chinese on contemporary American screens to a more critical understanding of the political nature of the relationship between identity and representation. Shih eloquently states:

To decouple homeness and origin is to recognize the imperative of living as a political subject within a particular geopolitical space in a specific time with deep local commitments. To link homeness with the place of residence therefore becomes an ethical act that chooses concrete political engagement in the local. The claim of rootlessness by some nostalgia-driven, middle-class, first-generation immigrants is, for example, oftentimes narcissistic to the extent that it is not aware of its own trenchant conservatism and even racism. The place of residence can change—some people migrate more than once—but to consider that place as home may thus be the highest form of rootedness. Routes, then, can become roots. This is not a theory of mobile citizens who disidentify from the local nation-state and disengage from local politics, but the politicization of that mobility.⁷

This book deals with films made primarily in English; however, the dialectic between “roots” and “routes” remains salient as filmmakers work between Asia and the United States, the Sinophone and the Anglophone, as well as within the African, Chinese, and other diasporic communities.

Historical Background of the Chinese on American Screens

As Arthur Dong points out in his documentary, *Hollywood Chinese* (2007), Chinese filmmakers have contributed to American screen culture since the silent era. In 2006, the National Film Registry of the United States selected Marion Wong’s *The Curse of Quon Gwon: When the Far East Mingles with the West* (1916) for inclusion. Although no complete print of the film survives, the fact that Arthur Dong⁸ uncovered several extant reels speaks volumes about the unwritten history of Chinese American filmmakers, ethnic Chinese women



Figure 1.1 Scene from *Hollywood Chinese* (2007). Directed by Arthur Dong. Courtesy of DeepFocus Productions, Inc. Photo source National Archives.

filmmakers, and the creative power of overseas Chinese working outside of the commercial Hollywood system. Made shortly after D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Cecil B. DeMille's *The Cheat* (1915), this Chinese American film must be considered an equally important achievement within the history of American—and world—cinema.

Although Wong's efforts in the United States may be somewhat isolated, they are far from unique. In fact, another pioneering ethnic Chinese woman filmmaker, Esther Eng/Ng Kam-ha, had a career that spanned decades. Her classics, such as *Golden Gate Girl* (1941), made under the auspices of the transnational Grandview Film Company, dramatize life in the Chinese diaspora, appealing to audiences in Hong Kong as well as San Francisco. As a performer, American-born Anna May Wong had a career that traversed several continents and spanned the silent and sound eras as well.

The current star status of Jackie Chan and Jet Li in Hollywood most likely would not have been possible without the international megastardom of Bruce Lee. Lee stands at the cusp of the Chinese diaspora and the American Dream, and over thirty years after his death in 1973, he is still Hong Kong's most recognized movie star internationally.⁹ Born in San Francisco, Lee grew up in Hong