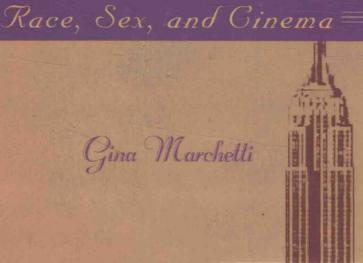
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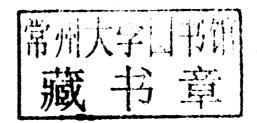
Gina Marchetti



### Gina Marchetti

# The Chinese Diaspora on American Screens

Race, Sex, and Cinema



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### 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, 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

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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," 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,<sup>3</sup> 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-

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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 Chinesespeaking 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

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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

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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." 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.<sup>7</sup>

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 Dong<sup>8</sup> uncovered several extant reels speaks volumes about the unwritten history of Chinese American filmmakers, ethnic Chinese women

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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. Born in San Francisco, Lee grew up in Hong