

## LING WOO IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

### *The New Face of Asian American Stereotypes on Television*

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In contemporary mass media, representations of Asian Americans are still rare. Although they comprise 3.6% of the U.S. population (Census 2000), only 0.8% of TV characters in the period 1991-1992 and 1.3% of TV characters in 1994-1997 were Asian Americans, and the majority of the roles were minor (Gerbner, 1998). According to *Fall Colors 2000-2001*, Asian Pacific American characters comprise 3% of the prime-time characters; however, if one focuses on primary recurring characters, the percentage drops to 2%. (Children Now, 2001, p. 15). Although the presentation of Asian American characters has increased in recent years, the underrepresentation and stereotyping of Asian Americans persists. One Asian American high school student stated, “[When you watch TV] you want to think I could do that. I could be there. That could be me in five or six years. But you don’t see anything of yourself” (Children Now, 2001, p. 21)

It is against this historical backdrop of invisibility that Lucy Liu seized public attention and became the most visible Asian American female star

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on TV with her role as Chinese American lawyer Ling Woo on the hit show *Ally McBeal*. Her presence also spreads out onto the big screen, and her latest role as one of the lead characters in *Charlie's Angels* was a step up to her stardom. If we examine Lucy Liu's representations in movies such as *Payback* and *Charlie's Angels*, we can trace the origins of her characterization of Ling Woo. Ling Woo is strong, outspoken, secure in her opinions, and open about her sexuality. Unlike the more common fresh-off-the-boat refugee Asian American character who speaks little or no English, Ling is an articulate, high-powered, and acculturated attorney. Very importantly, she breaks the "China doll" stereotype of Asian American women as submissive, frail, and quiet. Being an Asian beauty, Ling Woo also counters the blond-haired, blue-eyed white beauty standard. (Not only do men lust over her, but even Ally McBeal says that Ling has a "perfect, perfect" face.) As the most visible Asian American role on TV, Ling Woo's character raises the question: Is she breaking the stereotypes or actually reinforcing them? To answer this question, Elaine Kim has emphasized, "You have to place Ling in the context of at least a 100-year history of sexualization of Asian women (Lee, 1999, para. 10).

### ◆ *Asian American "Controlled Images" in the Media*

Ideological constructs very often reflect material conditions, and therefore it is important to understand the historical circumstances that led to the development of stereotypical perceptions. From the 1840s to the 1930s, a million men immigrated from China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and India to the United States and Hawaii to work as cheap laborers; U.S. immigration law treated those workers as temporary, disposable, and exploitable labor and

prohibited the entry of their families and Asian American women, fearing the permanent presence and growth of Asian Americans (Espiritu, 2000). During the late 19th century, the economic recession stirred up the Nativist movement against Asian immigrants. Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, and eventually in 1924 barred all Asians from immigrating to the United States (Mansfield-Richardson, 1996).

This immigration history helps explain why Asian American males are seen to this day as sexually deviant, paradoxically either asexual or as a rape threat to white women. In the pre-World War II era, Asian American males were forced to establish "bachelor societies" because of the unavailability of the women of their race. Anti-miscegenation laws prohibiting them from marrying white women. Chinese were posted as rape threats to the white woman and considered to have an "undisciplined and dangerous libido"; for example, in 1912, Saskatchewan law prohibited white women from being employed by Chinese-owned business (Fung, 1996, p. 82). At the same time, they were excluded from working at higher paying jobs in the growing metallurgical, chemical, and electrical industries, and were confined instead to low-paid, dead-end jobs as laborers, or doing "women's work" as laundrymen, cooks, and domestic servants (Ling, 1990, p. 145).

Because media are important "ideological state apparatuses" that reinforce hegemony (Althusser, 1971), the dissemination and perpetuation of the desexualized Asian American male stereotype obscure the history that prevented many Asian Americans from establishing conjugal families in pre-World War II United States (Espiritu, 2000, p. 91). Alfred Wang observed that between 1868 and 1952, "No other racial groups have been subjected to worse legalized . . . sexual deprivation than the Chinese male immigrants (Wang, 1988, p. 18, quoted in Espiritu, 2000, p. 19). In presenting Asian American males as "eunuchs," the media

have helped render the social and cultural oppression invisible. These emasculated stereotypes are embodied by Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu, the most far-reaching symbols for almost a half century.

The detective character Charlie Chan, developed by novelist Earl Derr Biggers in 1925 to 1932 and used in movies and television as recently as 1981, is a yellow-faced “house nigger” (Xing, 1998, p. 61) who walks with “the light dainty step of a woman” (Chin, Chan, Inada, & Wong, 1974, p. xvi) and speaks in fortune-cookie English (Cao & Novas, 1996). He represents “the helpless heathens to be saved by Anglo heroes or the loyal and lovable allies, sidekicks, and servants” (Kim, 1982, p. 4) and is “in essence an effeminate, wimpy, nerdy, inscrutable Asian male” (Cao & Novas, 1996, p. 60).

In contrast to Charlie’s passivity, Dr. Fu Manchu is a cruel, cunning, diabolical representative of the “yellow peril” (Xing, 1998, p. 57) who threatens to destroy Western civilization. Although Fu Manchu is powerful, he still lacks “masculine heterosexual prowess” and is an emasculated character

wearing a long dress, batting his eyelashes, surrounded by muscular black servants in loin cloths, and with his habit of caressingly touching white men on the leg, wrist, and face with his long fingernails is not so much a threat as he is a frivolous offense to white manhood. (Chin & Chan, 1972, p. 60, quoted in Espiritu, 2000, p. 91)

The emasculation of Asian American males continues today in the form of “nerdy Asian American adolescent math geniuses and brainy Asian American scientists who speak fortune-cookie English” (Cao & Novas, 1996, p. xvi.) Kung Fu masters, mostly played by Chinese actors but not Chinese Americans such as Jet Lee and Jackie Chan, can kick butt, but almost never play romantic and loving roles.

The hypersexualization of Asian American women stands in contrast to this portrayal of Asian American men as asexual, but this stereotype also has its root in immigration practice. When Asian American men were not allowed to establish conjugal families, they sought sexual outlets in prostitution. It was estimated that in 1870, 61% of the 3,536 Chinese women in California were prostitutes. In 1875, the Page Law prohibited the importation of Chinese prostitutes, but all Chinese women nevertheless continued to be suspected of being prostitutes, and regardless of their social status, were subject to harassment (Cao & Novas, 1996, p. 29; Chan, 1991, p. 132; Espiritu, 2000, p. 18).

The hypersexualization of Asian women in popular culture was also reinforced by U.S. military involvement in Asian in the 20th century when troops fought battles or were stationed in Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, Japan, and the counties of Southeast Asia. These soldiers “often developed strong perceptions of Asian women as prostitutes, bargirls and geishas”; these images are also prevalent in Asian war movies of this period (Villapando, 1989, p. 324). Thus, Asian American male asexuality and Asian American female hypersexuality serve to “confirm the white man’s virility and superiority” (Espiritu, 2000, p. 13).

Although America’s popular culture is generally male centered and male dominant, Asian American women are currently more visible than Asian American men, as Feng (1993) stresses:

Novelist Amy Tan is more widely read than novelist Shawn Wong; comedian/actor Margaret Cho got a shot at network television series, while Russell Wong had to settle for starring in the syndicated *Vanishing Son* and Asian American women anchor local news broadcasts across the country, while Asian American men occupy less visible positions as field reporters. (p. 27)

Though more visible, Asian American female actors still play very narrow roles. Tajima (1989) summarizes the Asian American female archetypes:

There are two basic types: the Lotus Blossom Baby (a.k.a. China Doll, Geisha Girl, shy Polynesian beauty) and the Dragon Lady (Fu Manchu's various female relations, prostitutes, devious madams). . . . Asian women in film are, for the most part, passive figures who exist to serve men—as love interests for white men (Lotus Blossoms) or as partners in crime of men of their own kind (Dragon Ladies). (p. 309)

Lotus Blossom is “a sexual-romantic object”; characters of her vein are the “utterly feminine, delicate and welcome respites from their often loud, independent American counterparts”(p. 309). Dragon Lady is her opposite—cunning, manipulative and evil; Anna May Wong immortalized that role in *Thief of Baghdad* (1924) where her character uses treachery to help an evil Mongol prince attempt to win the Princess of Baghdad. Both Lotus Blossom and Dragon Lady are hypersexualized, but the former is passive and subservient while the latter is aggressive and “exudes exotic danger” (Chihara, 2000, p. 26).

Tajima (1989) also points out the two very different kinds of relationships that Asian American women characters in popular culture have with white men and with men of their own race. She further suggests that “noticeably lacking is the portrayal of love relationships between Asian women and Asian men, particularly as lead characters” (p. 312) On-screen romance between Asian American men and white women is even more scarce because it ruptures white male hegemony (Hamamoto, 1994, p. 39). When sexuality is involved, an Asian American male is more likely to be portrayed as a “yellow peril” who presents a rape threat to white women, as is well documented by Marchetti (1993). She states that “rape narratives pose the danger

that the ‘pure’ but hopelessly fragile and childlike white woman will be ‘ruined’ by contact with the dark villain” (p. 8) and mainly uses examples from movies in the early part of the 20th century to demonstrate her points, movies such as Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Cheat* (1915), D. W. Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms* (1919), and *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933). In contemporary American popular culture, Xing (1998) observed that the yellow peril narrative may be less blatant but did not stop haunting the silver screen. He states that TV programs such as *Girls of the White Orchid* (1985) (a made-for-television program about white slavery in Tokyo), or movies such as the *Karate Kid* series (1980s) all have the subplots of “threat of rape” (p. 58).

On the other hand, the pairing of a white male and Oriental female is naturalized and has its colonialist root, manifested in the “rescue” narrative. Ella Shohat (1997) points out:

Not only has the Western imaginary metaphorically rendered the colonized land as a female to be saved from her environmental disorder, it has also projected rather more literal narratives of rescue, especially of Western and non-Western women—from African, Asian, Arab, or Native American men. (p. 39)

Buescher and Ono (1996), in their critique of Disney’s *Pocahontas*, state that “in the name of saving women, colonialism presented itself as a necessary and benevolent force” (p. 132). It is important to note that the rescue is not only physical but also psychological. *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), *The Year of Dragon* (1985), *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987), *Karate Kid II* (1986), and *The Red Corner* (1998) are just some obvious examples.

The West’s dominance is secured through narratives of romance and sexuality that justify white men’s possession of the bodies of the women of color (Marchetti, 1993, p. 6). The romantic relationship

between a white male and an Asian female is always unequal and demands her total devotion and submission, body and soul. *Madame Butterfly*, the ultimate symbol of Oriental femininity, was first written as a short story by John Luther Long in 1898. It was adapted by Giacomo Puccini as an opera, premiered in 1904 in Milan, and in a very short time became popular and was widely performed (Xing 1998, p. 59). It is a story about Pinkerton, a U.S. naval officer stationed in Nagasaki, who had a love affair with a local prostitute Cho-Cho-San. After Pinkerton goes back to United States, devoted Cho-Cho-San gives birth to his son and awaits his return. Betraying Cho-Cho-San's love, Pinkerton gets married and several years later, he comes back to Japan with his American wife to claim his son, indifferent to Cho-Cho-San's suffering. Heartbroken, she commits suicide. Cho-Cho-San is reincarnated again and again in the public imagination as a Japanese Takarazuka performer in *Sayonara* (1957), and a Vietnamese prostitute in *Miss Saigon* (1991). Wilkinson (1990) states:

In recent centuries the rich tradition of Oriental exoticism took a new form as colonial conquest and rule provided the opportunity in the form of readily available girls, and encouraged Europeans and Americans to think of the West as active and masculine and the East as passive and feminine. (p. 13)

*Madame Butterfly* symbolizes and justifies the Orient's submission to the West's patriarchal domination in that the creators naturalized her inferiority, selfless dedication, and ultimate self-sacrifice.

## ◆ *Ally McBeal*

Launched in the fall of 1998, within months, *Ally McBeal* won the Golden Globe award for best comedy, and Calista Flockhart, who plays the title character,

won the best actress award (Leafe, 1998). Both critically and commercially acclaimed, this show even placed Flockhart's face on a *Time* magazine cover as the poster child for postfeminism with the title: "Is Feminism Dead?" (Bellafante, 2000). The show is centered around Ally McBeal, a young female lawyer in a law firm where partners are lovers with their associates and colleagues discuss sex more than work.

In its first season, this show drew 12 million viewers, half of them men and half women, and in 1998, the audience reached 14.8 million (Cooper, 1999). This show is often described by critics as either loved or hated by its viewers. Bellafante (1998) states that Ally McBeal represents an "It's all about me" type of feminism. "If feminism of the '60s and '70s was steeped in research and obsessed with social change, feminism today is wed to the culture of celebrity and self-obsession" (para. 7). Shalit (1998) calls Ally McBeal a "do-me feminist" who is

plucky, confident, upwardly mobile, and extremely horny. She is alert to the wounds of race and class and gender, but she knows that feminism is safe for women who love men and bubble baths and kittenish outfits; that the right ideology and the best sex are not mutually exclusive. She knows that she is as smart and as ambitious as a guy, but she's proud to be a girl and girlish. (para. 6)

Shalit (1998) condemned the show as "a slap in the face of the real-life working girl, a weekly insult to the woman who wants sexual freedom and gender equality, who can date and litigate in the same week without collapsing in a Vagisil heap" (p. 27). But Chambers (1998) thinks the show

has clearly struck a nerve with twenty-something women who feel both excited and confused by the choices bestowed upon them by the feminist movement. They understand Ally's big question: "If I have it all, can I be happy?"... It

captures the sense of anxious expectation that people feel in their 20s, when most of life's important decisions still lie ahead. (para. 3)

And Chambers's interviewees seemed to confirm her observations with comments such as "Emotionally, I've been through a lot of similar feelings to Ally," and "This isn't exactly the way [putting long hours at the office] I saw my life playing out. If all this is being put off, then I want a great marriage. I want him to knock my socks off. I want him to blow me away." Cooper (1999) argues that the show constantly pokes fun of male chauvinism and asserts female sexuality and freedom. (p. 3). Cooper draws from Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" in film studies, which proposes that classic Hollywood films force the viewers to look at women characters from a masculine viewer's perspective, regardless of the real gender of the viewer, but applies Arbuthnot and Seneca's reading of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* to *Ally McBeal*, stating that the characters refuse to yield to the male gaze but become active; they gaze back and expose the gazer (p. 7). Lewis (1998), a dedicated male fan, fiercely defends the show and can't understand why feminist critics were unable to differentiate comedies from reality and believes "people who are aghast . . . should have their medication checked" (para. 4). Overall, the critics have been concerned about the gender issues in the show, but have largely overlooked its racial dimensions. Lucy Liu's character Ling Woo stands out among the mostly blond beauties, not only for her looks but also for the way she evokes a longstanding symbolic history of Orientalism in a new way.

### ◆ *Ling Woo*

Ling Woo is tough, rude, candid, aggressive, sharp-tongued, and manipulative. She certainly breaks the "China doll" stereotype,

and she is neither submissive nor selfless. However, she is suspiciously like a "dragon lady" when she growls like an animal, breathing fire at Ally, walking into the office with the music of Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz*. But what really makes Ling Woo stand out is how the producer David Kelley has built an ultra sexualized aura around her. In fact, Kelley created the character especially for Lucy Liu after she originally auditioned unsuccessfully for the role of Nell (Mendoza, 1999). When Ling was first introduced to the show, she was suing a Howard Stern-like disc jockey, Wick, because his programs contributed to sexual harassment in her workplace. He said that the reason why Ling brought suit was that she had a "slutty little Asian thing going." And Ling said, in a pretty twisted logic, that part of her wanted to sleep with him because if she did, she would kill him.

Ling also sexualizes and objectifies herself. In another show, Ling sued a nurse for pretending to have breast implants, a trick that led to Ling's sister's plastic surgery. Ling recalled that the nurse "unveils. She's full. Soft. Without a hint of a blemish. I almost signed up and my breasts are beyond reproach." Ling also has owned a mud-wrestling club as well as an escort service marketed to underage boys.

Although almost all the women in the show are sex-hungry, Ling still stands out for her kinky sexual preferences and techniques. Her talk on sex is explicit and graphic ("What I really want out of a relationship at the end of the day . . . is a penis." Or she has a polyp in her throat because her boyfriend "didn't want her to scream.") She used to tape hundred-dollar bills to her privates to "smell like money." She asks her boyfriend, Richard Fish (played by Greg Germann, a white man), not to call her by her name but to call her "fruit" or anything related to food. She performs "hair jobs" (brushing her long hair on his bare chest to arouse him), sucks his finger, and becomes a sex kitten when he caresses her knee-pit. At the beginning of

their relationship, she restrains herself from having sex with Richard and her reason is all the more tantalizing: once men have had sex with her, they cannot have enough. Later, when their relationship has a problem, the first thing she says is that she is faking her orgasm.

In an episode aired on November 1, 1999, during the sweeps period when ratings are used to set local station's advertising rates, Ling kisses Ally. Although it seems to be producer David Kelley's ratings-boosting technique to use tantalizing lesbian kissing scenes (all the while affirming those kissers' heterosexuality), Ling's role is particularly seductive when compared to the other heterosexual situations. Ally once kissed her office assistant Elaine and another time her co-worker Georgia, but both times are out of unpleasant necessity: getting rid of a man she is not interested in dating. But for her third lesbian-ish kiss, she is definitely seduced by Ling. Scott Seomin from the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation explained that the reason why Ling was chosen to be the seducer was because she is "the exotic, erotic experimenter of the group" (Lee, 1999, para. 3).

Consistent with a history of representation that scarcely ever shows Asian men as sexually desirable, Ling has romantic involvements with both white men (primarily with the law firm partner Richard Fish) and a black man (a lawyer Jackson Duper, played by Taye Diggs), but no "yellow" man. One episode that had visible Asian American men in the show included a waiter in a Chinese restaurant (played by Alex Shen) who barely spoke English, misunderstood the order, and cooked Ling's colleague's pet frog. Although frog leg is also a delicacy in French cuisine, Kelley may have had his conscious or unconscious reasons to set the storyline in a Chinese restaurant because it resonates with the common myth that Chinese "eat everything" including their pet dogs and cats. Thus, Hollywood's history of emasculating Asian American men and hypersexualizing Asian American women is alive and well in *Ally McBeal*.

Ling's character is controversial in Asian American communities. She is popular among Asian American female college students who cheer how that character breaks the stereotypes of submissive and quiet Asian American females. Their opinions can be summed up by the author who wrote "Lucy Liu . . . My Girl From *Ally McBeal*" in a college publication for Asian American students:

Strong Asian female role models are few and far between in the media today. Typically, Asian women are seen as "fresh off the boat," non-English speaking, small, naïve, sex objects, or in denial about their culture. . . . Ling is not the soft spoken, passive, quiet Asian woman that society has stereotyped us as. She is tough, aggressive, and worldly . . . she is . . . a beautiful, sexy woman with a mind that is both cunning and slick . . . she is not the typical Asian "geisha" girl. Let her be a model for us to be strong, smart, sexy, and aggressive. (Tolenino, 1999, p. 16)

At the same time, Darrell Hamamoto, whose *Monitored Peril* is so far the most comprehensive study of Asian American characters on TV, calls Ling "a neo-Orientalist masturbatory fantasy figure" who is "concocted by a white man whose job it is to satisfy the blocked needs of other white men who seek temporary escape from their banal and deadening lives by indulging themselves in a bit of visual cunnilingus while relaxing on the sofa" (Lee, 1999, para. 7). Helen Liu, a media consultant about Asian American issues, states that people are drawn to Ling not because she was central or powerful but because of her stereotypical qualities (Chihara, 2000, p. 26). Although Ling is problematic, there is a common sentiment that "it is better than nothing": as Chun (2000) said in *Asian Week*, "It is pretty cool that there's an all-American Asian Angel—that would never have happened in the 70s" (p. 31).

These different and opposed readings of Ling's character demonstrate the polysemic nature of the media text (Fiske, 1986) as well as how differing levels of knowledge about the historic context of Asian American representations affect the reading. It is also true that the message of the character "depends largely on what the viewer brings to the sofa" (Zahra, 1999, p. 20) and that audiences do make resistive or oppositional readings even if they are dedicated fans (Jenkins, 1995). Research that can bridge an examination of Asian American representations with an analysis of how those representations actually affect both Asian Americans and other racial groups is urgently needed. Ethnographic interviews and small groups would be particularly helpful in investigating the tension between media hegemony and the individual viewer's autonomy. We should also examine how the media's political economy affects Asian American's media representations and agitate for regulatory and systematic change.

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