

From “Dragon Lady” to Authentic Representation: The Evolution and Cultural Impact of Asian Female Stereotypes in American Film

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Abstract: Globalization has brought increased attention to gender equality, thus driving an evolution in the portrayal of Asian women in film. For decades, Hollywood has reinforced biases and hindered progress in gender equality by depicting Asian women via stereotypes such as the Dragon Lady and Lotus Blossom. This paper examines the evolution of Asian female representation and its impact on gender equality, tracing the transition from early stereotypes to more nuanced portrayals in films like *Crazy Rich Asians* and *The Farewell*. Specifically, it investigates how race and gender intersect in portraying Asian women in American films and how this evolution challenges traditional stereotypes. Employing a mixed-methods research design, the study integrates quantitative surveys with qualitative content analysis, centering on recent mainstream films and TV shows. The results show that while Asian women’s portrayals have become more diverse and complex, gender equality remains challenging, emphasizing the need for authentic portrayals to break stereotypes and promote inclusivity.

Keywords: Asian Female Representation, Gender Stereotypes and Biases, Cinematic Agency, Media and Gender Equality

1. Introduction

The portrayal of Asian women in American cinema has undergone significant transformation. From early 20th-century stereotypical depictions to more complex characterizations in contemporary films, the evolution of Asian female representations deeply reflects the intersections and conflicts of gender, culture, and race. Early Hollywood films reinforced negative stereotypes of Asian women, portraying them as submissive, dependent, or dangerous through characters like the Lotus Blossom and Dragon Lady [1]. These characters not only confined Asian women to limited social roles but also mirrored Western cultural colonialism and Orientalist perspectives [2]. With the progress of society and culture, especially through globalization and multiculturalism, Asian women in films have become more diverse and multidimensional. In modern films, Asian women are no longer just supporting roles tied to family but are portrayed with independence and emotional depth. However, despite these advances, certain stereotypes, such as emotional suppression and cultural conflict, still persist. This paper investigates the changing representations of Asian women in American cinema, analyzing the influence of films on societal perceptions of Asian women through the intersections of gender equality and cultural identity. The socio-cultural forces driving this shift are explored, from early

stereotypes to more complex contemporary portrayals. Besides, it explores how director background, racial differences, and emotional expression shape character portrayals, while also addressing audience perceptions and challenges in gender equality.

2. Literature review

2.1. The stereotypical construction of Asian women: historical retrospective

Early 20th-century American films often relied on racial and gender stereotypes to portray Asian women, creating iconic character types like the Lotus Blossom and the Dragon Lady. The former embodies traits of submissiveness, dependence, and gentleness, while the latter portrays Asian women as cunning, dangerous, and aggressive [3]. And these stereotypes reflected contemporary sociocultural perceptions, and were continuously reinforced in visual narratives, thus legitimizing Western-centric racial hierarchies. It is noted that the construction of these images is deeply rooted in colonial discourse and Orientalism, maintaining Western cultural superiority by framing the East as the exotic other. Despite the film industry's evolution, early visual representations still heavily influence the portrayal of Asian women in modern cinema.

2.2. The representation of Asian women in contemporary film: progress and limitations

With the rise of multiculturalism and globalization, the portrayal of Asian women in American media has become more diverse and complex. Films such as *Crazy Rich Asians* and *The Farewell* introduce female characters who are independent, autonomous, and multidimensional, breaking away from traditional stereotypes to some extent [4]. However, it is argued that despite adjustments to certain stereotypical depictions, issues such as hyperfeminization and cultural dissonance remain prevalent. Some portrayals still rely on established tropes, emphasizing emotional suppression or exaggerated emotional expression, reinforcing Western audiences' preconceived notions of Asian femininity. Thus, although contemporary films show more diverse portrayals of Asian women, they remain influenced by historical stereotypes. Mainstream cultural narratives continue to shape their depiction, often reinforcing enduring racial and gender expectations.

2.3. Intersectionality and Orientalism: theories on Asian women's representation

Theories of intersectionality and Orientalism provide crucial academic frameworks for analyzing the portrayal of Asian women in cinema. Intersectionality examines how gender, race, class, and cultural identity intersect to influence experiences of discrimination [5]. In film narratives, the portrayal of Asian women is influenced by a combination of gender norms, racial discourse, cultural identity, and social class dynamics. Meanwhile, Edward Said's theory of Orientalism emphasizes how Western culture constructs the Orient as mysterious, exotic, and inferior to sustain its cultural hegemony [6]. This construction is evident in the portrayal of Asian women in film, often depicted either as submissive, obedient figures or as menacing exotic others. Although recent films have made strides toward more nuanced portrayals, these entrenched stereotypes continue to shape the cultural representation of Asian women, revealing the deep-seated intersections of gender, race, and power structures in visual media.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study uses content analysis, alongside intersectionality and Orientalism theories, to examine the portrayal and socio-cultural significance of Asian female characters in American films. The focus is

placed on the representation of Asian female characters in terms of professional identities, personality traits, emotional expression, and social relationships across different historical and social contexts. In particular, a codebook is developed to quantify variables such as character traits, emotional expression, social relationships, and stereotypes. Each variable has clear classification criteria to ensure systematic and consistent data. For example, professional identity is classified as professional or family-oriented, and emotional expression as suppressed or exaggerated. Through content analysis, the study aims to reveal the patterns of portrayal of Asian female characters and analyze their intersection with gender and race issues [7]. Thematic analysis examines the portrayal of Asian female characters, determining whether they reinforce stereotypes or showcase more nuanced personalities. It also considers whether they align with or transcend traditional cultural and gender expectations. In addition, by incorporating audience perception analysis, it collects discussions from social media and professional film reviews to explore how audiences perceive and understand Asian female characters. And it may shed light on how film portrayals influence audience perceptions of gender and race. The coding is carried out by one researcher, who ensures consistency and accuracy through repeated proofreading and corrections. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Asian female characters often embody traditional gender and racial stereotypes.

H2: Films directed by Asian or multiracial directors tend to present more complex portrayals of Asian female characters.

H3: The emotional expression of Asian female characters is typically more constrained, whereas non-Asian characters have greater developmental space.

3.2. Sample selection

Theoretical sampling is employed to ensure data representativeness and broad applicability. Selection criteria include diversity in film genres, character development, director background, and themes. The sample includes American films between 1990 and 2022, covering both mainstream blockbusters and independent films to reflect differences between these narratives [4]. This period reflects significant changes in the representation of Asian female characters in terms of gender and racial stereotypes, and character complexity, since the 1990s, which allows for the examination of how socio-cultural shifts have influenced character portrayal in films.

Each film must feature at least one Asian female character who plays a significant role in the plot, with a notable on-screen presence and a key influence on the narrative. The importance of the character is assessed based on their role in advancing the plot or making a significant impact on the protagonist, ensuring the scientific and systematic selection of samples. Furthermore, the study includes films directed by directors from diverse racial backgrounds, such as Asian, White, Black, and other minority directors, to explore the impact of the director's cultural background on the portrayal of Asian female characters. The sample includes various genres, such as drama, romantic comedy, action, and science fiction, to highlight the evolution of Asian female representations across film types. For example, the study includes culturally and socially influential films such as *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005), *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), and *The Farewell* (2019), which exhibit huge differences in narrative strategies, cultural representation, and character development, providing rich material for the study.

3.3. Data collection

The data collection follows a systematic coding scheme to ensure the operability and consistency of the study, and the codebook includes the following core variables. First, the basic information section records the film title, release year, and director's racial background to reflect the historical and social context. The character traits section analyzes the character's profession, social status, and personality

traits (e.g., independent, submissive, cold), evaluating whether they conform to or challenge traditional gender and racial stereotypes. And the language and cultural identity section examines the character's language use, thus exploring its reflection of cultural identity and social positioning. The emotional expression section examines the restraint or exaggeration of emotions, analyzing whether it aligns with traditional stereotypes of Asian women [7]. The interpersonal relationships section explores interactions between the character and non-Asian characters, identifying cultural and racial intersections. Also, the stereotypes section examines whether the film reinforces or challenges traditional Asian female images, such as the lotus blossom or dragon lady. Film data is collected by viewing each film and extracting relevant variables to ensure thorough coverage. In addition, comments from social media and film reviews about Asian female characters is curated. These comments undergo sentiment analysis and topic extraction using natural language processing techniques to assess audience perceptions and reactions to the characters.

3.4. Data analysis techniques

This study uses both quantitative and qualitative analysis methods to ensure systematic and in-depth data analysis. In the quantitative analysis, character traits are first quantified using a coding scheme, assigning values to personality traits like independence and submissiveness, and setting scoring criteria for emotional expression such as restraint or exaggeration. Descriptive statistics are used to analyze the distribution of character traits, while statistical methods like chi-square tests examine differences in the portrayal of Asian female characters in films directed by directors of various racial backgrounds, identifying overall trends and exploring the impact of director background on character diversity and complexity. In addition, comments from film review websites and social media are incorporated, and thematic analysis is used to identify core topics in public discussions about Asian female characters, revealing common evaluations and perspectives. In the qualitative analysis, thematic analysis is used to explore how Asian female characters are portrayed in films, focusing on how elements such as family responsibility, cultural conflict, and emotional expression shape character development and connect to specific socio-cultural contexts. This study analyzes dialogue and visuals to explore how films shape Asian women's identity and whether they reinforce gendered stereotypes, comparing portrayals across director backgrounds to highlight how Asian directors challenge these stereotypes.

4. Results

4.1. Representation of occupation and personality of Asian female characters

Asian female characters vary significantly in occupation, personality traits, and stereotypes across films. Table 1 presents the roles and characteristics of these characters in five films, noting the presence or absence of stereotypes, showing that modern portrayals depict Asian women as more independent and complex, emphasizing career success and emotional depth, in contrast to earlier, more stereotypical roles. For instance, Rachel Chu in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) is an independent, ambitious economics professor, challenging traditional gender stereotypes [4]. Similarly, Billi in *The Farewell* (2019) shows emotional complexity while dealing with cultural and family pressures, thus reflecting a more nuanced portrayal of emotional depth.

Table 1: Occupation and personality type of Asian women characters

Movie Title	Character(s)	Occupation	Character Traits	Stereotype Elements
Crazy Rich Asians (2018)	Rachel Chu (Constance Wu)	Economics Professor	Intelligent, Independent, Ambitious	None (Empowered Role)

Table 1: (continued)

The Farewell (2019)	Billi (Awkwafina)	Aspiring Writer	Conflicted, Strong, Emotionally Rich	None (Complex Character with Cultural Conflict)
Memoirs of a Geisha (2005)	Sayuri (Zhang Ziyi)	Geisha	Passive, Beauty-Centered	Lotus Blossom Stereotype
The Joy Luck Club (1993)	Multiple Characters	Various (Housewives, Professionals)	Emotionally Rich, Family-Centered	Passive, Family-Dependent Traditional Traits
To All the Boys I've Loved Before (2018)	Lara Jean (Lana Condor)	High School Student	Sweet, Shy, Family-Centered	Family-Dependent, Emotionally Restrained

In contrast, early films often portrayed Asian female characters as passive, dependent on family, or centered around beauty [8], reinforcing traditional gender and racial stereotypes [9]. For example, Sayuri in *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) represents the lotus blossom stereotype, relying on her appearance and traditional role expectations, lacking emotional depth and autonomy. The characters in *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) present various professional backgrounds but generally portray passive, family-dependent traits. Lara Jean in *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) exhibits some independent characteristics but is still constrained by traditional frameworks of emotional restraint and family dependence. The comparison reveals that modern films portray Asian female characters with greater independence and emotional depth, whereas early films restricted them to gender and racial stereotypes [7]. For example, Sayuri contrasts sharply with Rachel Chu: the former embodies a passive, dependent character, while the latter represents independence, self-control, and career success [10]. These differences reflect evolving trends in character development and shifts in societal and cultural perceptions in both film and media.

4.2. The influence of director's background on the representation of Asian female characters

The ethnic background of the director has a significant impact on the complexity of Asian female characters and the presence of stereotypes [11]. Specifically, films directed by Asian directors typically feature more nuanced, multi-dimensional characters who challenge traditional gender and racial norms, showcasing traits like independence and cultural conflict [12]. In contrast, films directed by non-Asian directors tend to present more stereotypical, one-dimensional portrayals, often depicting Asian women as passive and focused on family or external expectations. As shown in Table 2, the director's ethnic background is closely linked to the portrayal of characters. For example, in *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), directed by Jon M. Chu, an Asian-American director, the character Rachel is portrayed as empowered, independent, and ambitious. She is not only a career-driven woman but also exhibits autonomy in both her emotional life and personal identity, breaking free from traditional stereotypes [4]. Similarly, in *The Farewell* (2019), directed by Chinese-American Lulu Wang, the character Billi navigates cultural conflicts and family pressure, showcasing a complex emotional landscape and multi-dimensional identity, further reflecting the unique perspective Asian directors bring to character portrayal [13].

Table 2: Director's ethnic culture and its influence on eastern women character representation

Movie Title	Director's Ethnicity	Character(s)	Character Complexity	Present Stereotype
Crazy Rich Asians (2018)	Asian American (Jon M. Chu)	Rachel Chu (Constance Wu)	Empowered, Independent, Ambitious	None (Empowered)

Table 2: (continued)

The Farewell (2019)	Asian American (Lulu Wang)	Billi (Awkwafina)	Complex, Cultural Conflict	None (Complex Identity)
Memoirs of a Geisha (2005)	White (Rob Marshall)	Sayuri (Zhang Ziyi)	Submissive, Beauty-Centered	Lotus Blossom Stereotype
The Joy Luck Club (1993)	Asian American (Wayne Wang)	Multiple Characters	Emotionally Rich, Family-Centered	Passive, Submissive

In contrast, films directed by non-Asian directors, such as *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005), directed by Rob Marshall, continue to portray traditional Asian female stereotypes. The character Sayuri epitomizes the submissive, beauty-centered Lotus Blossom stereotype, lacking emotional depth and autonomy [14]. This portrayal reflects non-Asian directors' tendency to rely on outdated cultural frameworks for Asian female characters. These differences suggest Asian directors provide nuanced portrayals, while non-Asian directors rely on stereotypes.

4.3. Emotional expression and character development of Asian female characters

The emotional expression of Asian female characters has evolved from suppression to complexity in modern cinema. This transformation is closely tied to the evolving role of Asian women in films, reflecting broader societal changes. In earlier films, Asian female characters often exhibited emotional restraint, reinforcing traditional stereotypes [15]. For instance, in *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005), the character Sayuri embodies the Lotus Blossom stereotype, where her emotions are suppressed and subordinated to societal expectations, particularly the needs of the male characters around her. This portrayal of emotional suppression reflects the broader cultural and historical expectations of Asian women to be passive and self-sacrificing. Similarly, in *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), several characters are shown to suppress their emotions, often in the context of familial duty and cultural traditions, reinforcing the stereotype of the emotionally restrained Asian woman. However, as film representation of Asian women evolved, so did the portrayal of their emotional expression. In films such as *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and *The Farewell* (2019), Asian female characters show a greater range of emotional complexity. Rachel Chu in *Crazy Rich Asians* begins the story emotionally insecure, but as she navigates challenges in her career and romantic life, she becomes more confident and emotionally empowered. Similarly, in *The Farewell*, Billi's emotional journey, shaped by cultural and family conflicts, breaks the traditional image of the emotionally suppressed Asian woman, reflecting a broader shift in the portrayal of Asian women [16,17]. The characters' emotional journeys reflect increasing societal acceptance of more diverse and complex emotional expressions, highlighting the evolving understanding of Asian female identities both in cinema and in society [18]. And these emotional transformations highlight the recognition of Asian women as multi-dimensional individuals, moving away from past passive, stereotypical roles.

5. Discussion

In American cinema, the portrayal of Asian women has undergone a significant transformation, from early stereotypical representations to more diverse and complex characters in modern films. In early films, Asian female characters were often depicted as submissive, family-dependent, or centered around beauty, reinforcing gender and racial stereotypes. For example, Sayuri in *Memoirs of a Geisha* embodies the Lotus Blossom stereotype, with suppressed emotions and a lack of autonomy. However, as cinema evolved, films like *Crazy Rich Asians* and *The Farewell* began to portray Asian women with greater emotional depth and complexity, showcasing independence, career ambitions, and

emotional confidence [19]. Characters like Rachel Chu and Billi reflect the shift from traditional roles, revealing more multi-dimensional depictions of Asian women.

The ethnic background of the director also significantly impacts character portrayal. Asian directors tend to present more nuanced characters with cultural conflicts, whereas films directed by non-Asian directors, such as *Memoirs of a Geisha*, often rely on traditional stereotypes, portraying women as family-dependent and emotionally repressed. And this difference highlights how the director's cultural identity influences the complexity of the characters. Globalization and gender equality movements have resulted in more independent and emotionally diverse portrayals of Asian women. Audience perceptions vary by age and culture, highlighting cinema's role in promoting gender equality.

6. Conclusion

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative content analysis, focusing on recent mainstream films and TV shows. It examines the evolution of Asian female representation and its implications for gender equality, thus tracing the transition from early stereotypical depictions to more complex portrayals in films such as *Crazy Rich Asians* and *The Farewell*. The study reveals how socio-cultural forces have driven this transformation. Besides, it analyzes how factors like director background, racial differences, and emotional expression influence the portrayal of Asian female characters, while examining audience cognitive differences, highlighting both the progress and ongoing challenges in gender equality within society and culture. However, there are limitations, including a focus on mainstream Western films within a specific time frame, which may not capture the full diversity of portrayals. Future research could expand to include non-Western media, explore broader time periods, and investigate the intersection of race, gender, and class in shaping Asian female representations.

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