

From the director of *Forbidden City, U.S.A., Coming Out Under Fire, & Licensed to Kill*

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HOLLYWOOD CHINESE

The Chinese in American Feature Films



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STUDY & DISCUSSION GUIDE

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MEDIA LITERACY

Refer to DVD chapter numbers 1) Movie Magic, 2) Cinematic Memories.

Media literacy is the ability to analyze the form and structure of the film medium. It is where students attempt to assess films critically and to be mindful of the manipulation of history, culture, and individual perceptions of the world when deconstructing films. We recommend that media literacy be an underlying component of the learning objectives when using *Hollywood Chinese*.

Instructors may wish to offer explanations of film language and techniques. Some basic vocabulary in film analysis include “image,” “reality,” “subjectivity,” and “objectivity,” and can be elaborated through the following discussions:

1. What is the relationship between imagery and reality, especially in terms of the origins of racial and ethnic stereotypes?
2. What is the nature of the relationship between societies or groups that produce films and the societies or groups that are represented in these films?
3. How has personal experiences and memories affected your reading of a particular film?
4. Video diary is an effective tool for students to learn about the processes of image making. Assign students to film and share a personal and family story in the form of a video. The diaries not only become a means of self expression but also a way to learn that film is not an objective representation of reality but rather a director's construct, informed by conscious decisions about the messages the director wants to convey and the emotions he or she wants to evoke in viewers

EARLY CHINESE IMAGES

Refer to DVD chapter numbers 3) Early Chinese Images, 4) Chinatowns.

What is behind Hollywood's, and indeed the West's, fascination with the East? And what about Hollywood's attraction for America's Chinatowns as a locale for countless films? Writer David Henry Hwang suggests that Chinatowns have “represented something within American cities that is ‘other,’ which is defined by a different set of mores, different foods, and different people.”

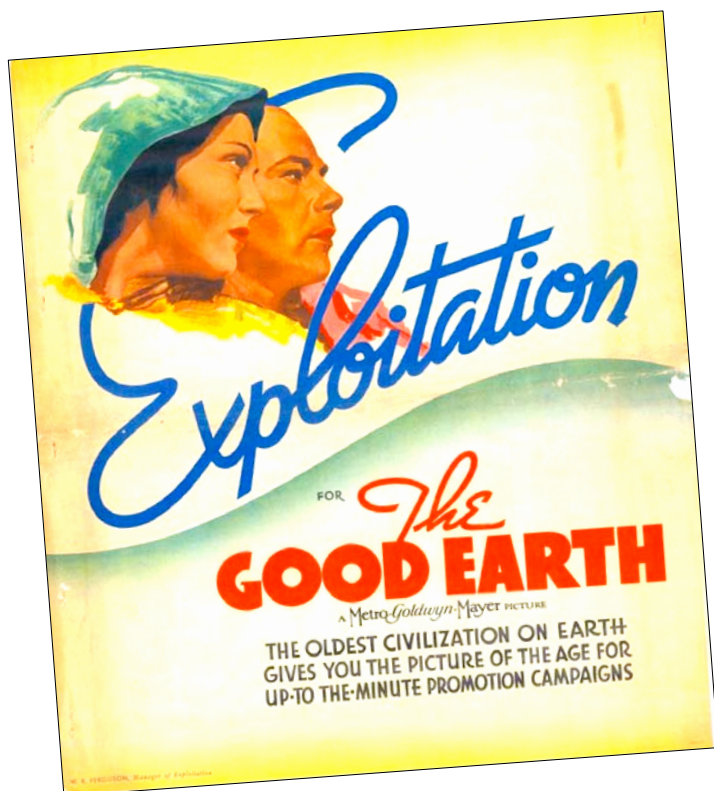
Hollywood Chinese traces some of the earliest depictions of the Chinese and the Chinese in America back to the yellow journalism popular in California during the 1800s when labor and immigration laws were enacted to persecute and exclude the Chinese. At the turn of the 20th century, as China was grappling with the Boxer Rebellion, the Chinese anti-foreign and anti-Christian movement organized to counter imperialist U.S. and missionary expansion in China, non-fiction short subjects like *Chinese Massacring Christians* (1903) were making their rounds at American nickelodeons nationwide. This film was typical of movies during the era that emphasized the barbaric nature of non-Western cultures. It reflected audiences interest for the bizarre and foreign and helped set a tone for the creation of fictionalized cinematic Chinese characterizations for decades to come.

1. Suggestion:
As documentary history, *Hollywood Chinese* may presuppose certain knowledge about the history of the Chinese and Chinese immigration to the United States. Teachers may find it helpful to provide some background information prior to screening the film. This historical overview doesn't need to be detailed, but an outline of important dates, events, and U.S. immigration policies will help students further appreciate the documentary.



YELLOWFACE

Refer to DVD chapter numbers 7) *The Good Earth*, 8) Anna May Wong, 9) *Dragon Seed*, 10) Charlie Chan, 11) Fu Manchu, 12) Actors Dilemma.



Yellowface, casting white actors to play Chinese, had been a Hollywood practice since the dawn of cinema. It perpetuated stereotypes as well as kept Chinese American actors out of work. While Chinese actors and actresses were often cast primarily as background fillers and to create cinematic atmosphere as extras and “racials,” leading roles went to their white counterparts. Such practices raise questions of identity and social dynamics. Suggest the following inquiries for students to further explore the tradition of racial impersonation in Hollywood:

1. How do the Chinese performers featured in *Hollywood Chinese* feel about yellowface? If you are of Asian descent, how do you feel about the practice? How do these performances affect your self-identity?
2. How do the non-Chinese performers featured in *Hollywood Chinese* feel about being cast in Chinese roles? If you are not of Asian descent, how do yellowface performances affect your outlook and knowledge of Asians?
3. Compare the depiction of Chinese characters and African American characters by white performers. Ask students to reflect on these performances and their impact on perceptions of ethnic groups.
4. Is yellowface ever an “acceptable” artistic choice or is it always racist, or somewhere in-between?
5. Research examples of how yellowface endured in Hollywood long after blackface was considered unacceptable.
6. To introduce another viewpoint on racial impersonation, suggest a discussion on Chinese American actor Richard Loo’s portrayal of the Japanese in World War II. Bring attention to Amy Tan’s discomfort in watching Miyoshi Umeki, a Japanese actress, portray a Chinese immigrant in *Flower Drum Song*. Refer to DVD chapter numbers 13) World War II and 17) *Flower Drum Song*.
7. Some historians and scholars have explained the yellowface practice to be a result of anti-miscegenation laws that made it unlawful for an Asian actor and a Caucasian actor to kiss or be intimate on screen. Casting a Caucasian in yellowface was acceptable because it would actually be two Caucasians kissing. Research how anti-miscegenation laws have impacted other facets of life in the United States.

FEMALE REPRESENTATION

Refer to DVD chapter numbers 15) Suzie Wong, 16) *The Last Emperor*, 23) *M. Butterfly*.

Hollywood Chinese includes several sequences from the screen adaptation of David Henry Hwang's 1988 Tony Award-winning play, *M. Butterfly*, a true story of a French diplomat duped by a Chinese man masquerading as a woman. This scenario provides an entrée to discuss Hollywood's practice of creating the Chinese female image. Other films to include in this discussion are *The World of Suzie Wong*, *Tai Pan*, and *Mountain Road*.

1. Because of its complexity, some students may not fully appreciate *M. Butterfly* without knowing the original *Madame Butterfly* story. Assign students to research Giacomo Puccini's opera and compare it with *M. Butterfly*.
2. Ask students to list stories, films, television shows, and/or novels that feature Chinese or Chinese American women. Cite examples from *Hollywood Chinese*. Then suggest the following inquiries:
 - Describe the depictions of these women. How do they fall into predictable categories? How do any of these depictions defy categorization?
 - Are any of the portrayals "exoticized?" If so, how and why?
 - How has Hollywood helped shape America's public perception of Chinese and Chinese American women?
3. Discuss and compare the submissive and demure "lotus blossom" or "butterfly" caricature versus the cunning and evil "dragon lady" caricature.
 - How do these characters contribute to the hyper- or super-feminization of Chinese and Chinese American women?
 - How does the super-feminization of Chinese/Chinese American women and the feminization or emasculation of Chinese/Chinese American men feed on each other?
4. Actress Nancy Kwan, who created the Suzie Wong screen persona, was accused of perpetuating a stereotype by a reporter who said, "Because you played that prostitute, everybody thinks that all Chinese women are whores." Kwan responded, "I'm an actor, that's my profession."
 - How do you agree or disagree with Kwan and the reporter?
 - Discuss the roles of artists and their responsibilities towards their art and to their community. Explore how their accountability would differ if the artist was a member of the majority or mainstream society versus an artist who is a member of the minority culture or society. Should artists' responsibilities differ based on their standing in society?

