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UGS 303: Arts, Your Money, and the Nation (61605)

5 May 2016

The Rise of Asian American Cinema

Abstract

As Asian economies are emerging, Asian Americans, who were once seen as the stereotypical “other” race, are now seen as the successful model minority. This shift in perception towards anti-Asian racism is evident in Hollywood films. This paper examines the ways that Asian culture is increasingly depicted in Hollywood movies, and how the phenomenon is related to the geopolitical forces between the US and the Asian economies. An examination on the movie *The Karate Kid* (1984) and its 2010 remake shows that even though the two have similar story line, the 2010 remake portrays Asian culture in a more positive way compared to the 1984 movie. The different depictions of Asian culture between the 1984 movie and the remake corresponds to America’s changing perceptions towards Asia since post-World War II towards the 21st century. This change in portrayal of Asian culture is also related to the US-Asia international relations as well as the emergence of Asian economies. Through observing the shifts in anti-Asian racism and US-Asia relations, as well as comparing movies from the two era, this paper will show that there is a promising future for a less stereotypical depiction of Asian culture in Hollywood.

While Hollywood’s main purpose is to entertain viewers, Hollywood films have the potential to show a nation’s view on certain issues. One issue that is reflected in Hollywood

films is racism towards Asian Americans. Although Asian Americans were first seen as an inferior minority race, they are now seen as the successful model minority. This shift in anti-Asian sentiment is depicted in Hollywood movies. Over the past three decades, there have been improvements in portrayal of Asian culture in films. In this paper, I argue that the increase in positive portrayal of Asian culture in Hollywood is related to the emergence of Asian economies and their relations with the US economy. My conclusions will be based on the analysis of geopolitical forces between the US and Asian economies over the past few decades, as well as the comparison of the movie *The Karate Kid* (1984) and its 2010 remake. I will also propose that there is a future for a less stereotypical depiction of Asian culture in the media.

There are two main stereotypes of Asian Americans, which are the “yellow peril” and the “model minority.” The “yellow peril” stereotype perceives Asian Americans as outsiders who would “eventually overtake the nation and wreak social and economic havoc” (Kawai 112). The “model minority” stereotype is, on the other hand, a positive stereotype which implies that Asian Americans are able to succeed based on their own efforts despite their inferior racial background (Kawai 113). Although the “yellow peril” and the “model minority” stereotype has contrasting connotations, the two cannot be separated from each other (Kawai 115). While the “model minority” myth suggests that Asian Americans are “silent and disciplined,” these traits are both the “secret to [their] success” and what makes them threatening (Kawai 115). Kawai’s conclusion shows that although Asian American sentiment improves over the decades, there is always going to be an ambivalence in America’s perception of Asian Americans.

A comparison between the movie *The Karate Kid* (1984) and its 2010 remake shows the shift in Asian stereotypes from the “yellow peril” to the “model minority.” *The Karate Kid* (1984) tells of an Italian American boy named Daniel (Ralph Macchio) who moved to California

with his mother. Not long after, he became the victim of a group of bullies called the Cobra Kai who studied karate. He then befriended the Japanese maintenance man, Mr. Miyagi (Pat Morita), a karate master who later defended him from the bullies. Mr. Miyagi then taught Daniel karate, and Daniel eventually defeated the bullies in an open karate tournament. A movie with the same title, *The Karate Kid*, was released in 2010, with a similar plot line as the 1984 movie. The main character, Dre (Jaden Smith) is the 2010 version of Daniel. Dre moved to China with his mom and was faced with bullies who knew martial art. Dre then befriended the maintenance man, Han (Jackie Chan) who then taught him Kung Fu. In the end, Dre won against the bullies in an open Kung Fu tournament, just like Daniel. Although the two movies are similar in their plot lines, they offer two different portrayals of Asian culture. While the 1984 *Karate Kid* movie portrays an overall stereotypical depiction of the Asian culture, the 2010 remake shows a more positive portrayal of Asian culture.

Interestingly, these contrasting depictions of Asian culture correspond to the relations between America and their respective Asian countries, Japan for the 1984 movie and China for the 2010 remake. The 1984 movie was created at a period of uncertain Japanese-American relations. Anti-Japanese sentiment started during World War II, during which the attack on Pearl Harbor amplified the image of the Japanese as the “ruthless and animalistic enemy” or the “yellow peril” (Miles). Even though the Nixon presidency in the late 1960s marked the end of the postwar, it also started a “new and contentious” period of US-Japan relations (Curtis 3). Nixon’s “textile wrangler,” which forced Japan to voluntarily consent to textile export restraint (Flath 190), started the trade disputes between the two (Curtis 3). The textile dispute resulted in a high degree of anti-Japanese protectionist measures, which reached its peak in 1985 (Flath 194). These protectionist measures are signs that the US felt threatened by the Japanese economy,

viewing them as the dangerous “yellow peril.” Eventually, after 1985, Reagan’s presidency did result in efforts from both the US and Japanese government to minimize protectionist sentiment and improve their relations (Flath 194). Prior to that, however, trade relations between US and Japan were not in good terms.

The Karate Kid (1984) conveys Japanese-American relations at that time. While Japanese-American relations have improved since the World War II, Japan was still portrayed negatively. Mr. Miyagi’s background conveys the intense anti-Japanese sentiment caused by the World War II. When Mr. Miyagi tells his life story to Daniel, the audience finds out that he was a veteran who fought during the World War II on behalf of the United States. Although it seems subtle, this scene tells us that Japan is the dangerous country that has to be defeated, such that a Japanese would betray its own country to fight on behalf of America. In other words, Japan was portrayed as the “yellow peril,” a dangerous nation that had to be abolished.

In addition to portraying Japan as a dangerous nation, *The Karate Kid* (1984) also depicted Japanese culture as being inferior compared to the American culture. According to Jane Park in her book “Yellow Future: Oriental Style in Hollywood Cinema,” *The Karate Kid* (1984) fits the narrative of the “Oriental Monk,” one of the most common stereotype of Asians in films from the 1980s. Jane Iwamura defines the “Oriental Monk” as a “desexualized Asiatic male character with no discernible familial or community ties and ‘represents the last of his kind’” (as qtd. by Park 87). These monks would typically be a surrogate father to a troubled child, who will then be the “perfect inheritor” of the monk’s “skills and wisdom” (Park 87). According to Iwamura, the “Oriental Monk” stereotype suggests that Asian culture is “impotent within their racial context of origin,” and can only be preserved when there is a White person involved, which in this movie is the character Daniel (as qtd. by Park 87). The “Oriental Monk” stereotype

suggests that Asian culture is a “distant, dying culture” compared to the “industrialized West” (87). This inferior portrayal of Asian culture corresponds to the anti-Japanese hatred that still exists a few decades after World War II.

In contrast to the intense anti-Japanese sentiment after World War II and the contentious trade relations between the US and Japan, the 2010 *The Karate Kid* was created at a time when China was at its peak. In the article “Why America No Longer Gets Asia,” Evan Feigenbaum argued that Asian economies are rapidly growing. In 2000, China only made up 3.9 percent of Central Asia’s trade, whereas in 2008, China’s share quadrupled to 15.8 percent (Feigenbaum 29). Feigenbaum’s article concluded that Asian economies, particularly China, are growing rapidly and the United States might not be prepared for their “momentous rebirth” (2).

Feigenbaum also urges that the United States should adapt to Asia’s growth in order to remain “vital and relevant there” (40). Feigenbaum’s conclusion suggests that China is the “model minority” nation that is capable of developing despite its previously weak economic conditions.

The rise of China was also reflected in the producers’ choice to remake *The Karate Kid*. Sony Pictures, the producer of both the 1984 and 2010 movie, first rejected the idea of remaking the movie, since the “title was lying fallow” (Horn). However, when Overbrook Entertainment, the production company for Will Smith, Sony’s biggest star, proposed to set the remake in China, Sony agreed due to China’s prospect. At that time, Beijing was about to host the 2008 Olympics (Horn). China also generated a large amount of income for Hollywood, hence tapping into the market would generate popularity for the remake (Horn). This shows that China’s rapid growth was the push factor for Sony Pictures to remake a movie whose name lies dormant.

The 2010 remake of *The Karate Kid* portrays the emergence of China. According to Howard Schneider in an article published in the Washington Post, the remake of *The Karate Kid*

tells of a “lesson in geopolitics,” which is the rise of China. Schneider mentions that in the remake, America is “no longer the land of opportunity” – China is. The 1984 movie shows that the US is a “melting pot at its potent,” a place where an Italian kid can befriend an old Japanese karate master (Schneider). In the 2010 remake, both the US and Japan has diminished from the story, as the story was set in China (Schneider). Dre has migrated from the US because his mother was transferred from a failing factory in the US to a “better” and more promising one in China (Schneider). The Chinese setting in the 2010 remake promotes China instead of the US.

In addition to the difference in setting, the differences in the characters Mr. Miyagi and Han also portrays a contrasting connotations of Asian culture. The audience’s impression of Mr. Miyagi is a Japanese man in a small office, wearing a Japanese headband with a “fanatic” facial expression, and speaking limited English. Han, on the other hand, appeared in modern apparel, speaking in a manner that Dre could easily understand. In addition, during Han’s first conversation with Dre, he explained that the “hot water [was] fine,” and they only needed to “flip [the] switch, wait half [an] hour.” When Dre explained that “we don’t have a switch in America,” Han reminded Dre to “save planet,” implying that the Chinese culture is more advanced than the American culture. Through the differences in the characters Mr. Miyagi and Han, it can be seen that Asia is no longer the “distant, dying culture” portrayed in the 1984 movie. Instead, China is portrayed as being even more advanced compared to the United States. This idea corresponds to Feigenbaum’s article and the “model minority” stereotype. While the 1984 *The Karate Kid* portrays Japan as the “yellow peril,” the remake supports the “model minority” myth, which states that Asians can succeed through hard work.

Nevertheless, as Yuko Kawai mentioned, the “model minority” concept cannot be separated from the “yellow peril,” since the two will “form a circular relationship” (Kawai 115).

While *The Karate Kid* (2010) seems to portray Chinese culture as being advanced and successful, it may also portray the Asian culture as being threatening to Americans. Howard Schneider noted in his article that the 2010 remake is an “improbable reversal that speaks directly to the American anxieties of 2010.” Although this shows that Asian economies are emerging, it emphasizes the fact that Asian economies have the potential to threaten the US economy. However, the transition towards a completely favorable representation of Asian culture is still in progress. As the rights of minority groups are becoming increasingly acknowledged, the “model minority” stereotype can improve towards a more accurate truth on Asian-Americans. The three decades of shifting perceptions give a forecast of further change.

My analysis show that a piece of art, although created for entertainment purposes, can address issues about international relations and racism. The improvements in portrayal of Asian culture in Hollywood tell of the improvements in anti-Asian sentiment over the past few decades. Analysis of the two *The Karate Kid* movies show that the improvements in portrayal of Asian culture are related to the US relationship with China and Japan. With the Asian economies continuing to emerge, and as the United States becomes more tolerant towards minority races, we can expect to see a rise in portrayal of Asian culture in the future. Nevertheless, the ambivalence of Asian stereotypes still exists, and discrimination towards minority groups has not completely disappeared. However, the contrast between the two *The Karate Kid* movies still provides hope for an accurate representation of Asian culture. If three decades can create striking differences in representations of Asian culture in Hollywood, more improvements might emerge over the next few decades.

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