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## **'Yellowface': An Exploration of Hollywood's Film History with the Yellow Race**

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'Yellowface': An Exploration of Hollywood's Film History with the Yellow Race

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## Abstract

This study explores the history behind Hollywood's relationship with the depiction of Asians and Asian Americans in film. Through tracking examples of Hollywood's use of *yellowface* and *whitewashing* in movies from the 1920s into modern day, the study explores the historical and financial reasons behind controversial casting decisions, and how they affect the perceived image of Asians in America. In exploring the quantitative aspect, three films created within the last five years that were known to have participated in *whitewashing* were chosen and analyzed critically and financially. The data from these three movies were then used in comparison to *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), a recently released film starring an international Asian cast in order to analyze whether casting controversies can affect the financial box office success of a film.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore casting decisions in Hollywood films, particularly the casting of white actors over actors of Asian descent for characters that were originally written for and/or intended to be portrayed by Asians. I explored the reason behind this phenomenon, called “whitewashing”, and whether the casting decisions for specific films were made for financial reasons, and could be economically justified.

Less than three years ago in 2015, the Academy Awards (aka the Oscars) went through a PR backlash after fans and fellow members criticized the Academy for having NO person of color nominated in any of the major categories. According to a report from *The Economist*, the next year in 2016, the Academy was once again criticized because all 20 acting nominees and 4 out of 5 directors were white (J.T.). The question becomes, can we justify casting A-list Hollywood actors over actors of Asian descent in order to satisfy the intent of creating a financially successful film regardless of the culture and ethnicity of the material? Hollywood is notoriously known for favoring white actors over those of differing descent. According to the *2019 Hollywood Diversity Report* published by UCLA, white actors were cast in lead roles in over 80% in every film season released from 2011-2017. In the report, it was also noted that “only two out of every 10 lead actors are people of color” (Hunt et al. 14). According to the data on cast diversity, the report also shows that white actors were among 70% of all the top film roles while Asians made up 3.4% of the roles (Hunt et al. 21).

## Literature Review

In film, “whitewashing”, a popular phrase defined as “casting white actors in non-white roles” has been a prevalent occurrence in Hollywood since the 1900s (Falvey). From the early 1910s to as recent as 2008, films using ‘blackface’, a practice in which “white actors would routinely use black grease paint on their faces when depicting plantation slaves and free blacks on stage,” were also prevalent in the industry (Desmond-Harris). Likewise, Hollywood also has a

history with *yellowface*, also known as “the practice of white actors changing their appearance with makeup in order to play East Asian character in films, plays. etc.” (Cambridge English Dictionary, *Yellowface*). Examples of yellowface include Boris Karloff in *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, Paul Muni in *The Good Earth*, Marlon Brando in *The Teahouse of the August Moon*, Mickey Rooney in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* and *Cloud Atlas*. These examples, dating back as early as 1932 to as recent 2017, show how Hollywood has been largely unchanged in their casting decisions to include not people of color.

### Mid 1800s and the Beginning of the Yellow Peril

How did the normalization of whitewashing and yellowface specifically target Asians? During the mid-1800s, many Chinese migrated from their home country, chased away by high taxes after the Opium Wars, and settled in major California cities (History.com Editors, *History of San Francisco’s Chinatown*). In 1852, after a serious crop failure in southern China, twenty thousand and twenty six Chinese flooded to San Francisco compared to the 2,716 immigrants that arrived the previous year (“Chinese Immigrants and the Gold Rush”). And by the end of the 1850s, of the four counties making up the Southern Mines, Chinese immigrants made up one-fifth of the population (“Chinese Immigrants and the Gold Rush”). These immigrants took the jobs many Americans turned away and were instrumental in providing the labor needed to build the Central Pacific Railroad. Many whites dreaded the Chinese arrivals and in fear, made attempts to evict and even lynch the immigrants (Shim, 387), and “the frustrated whites justified their attack on the Chinese by claiming that the Chinese were unassimilable others and that the Chinese laborers sent money in the United States back to China” (Shim, 387). As the number of Chinese laborers rose, the American sentiment began to decrease citing “economic and cultural tensions, as well as ethnic discrimination” (U.S. Department of State). This meant that Chinese laborers had little-to-no bargaining power on their wages, unlike that of their American

counterpart, and many American laborers felt as though their jobs were being stolen away from them.

With tensions rising in the 1880s, President Hayes made an agreement with China to revise the *Burlingame-Seward Treaty Act* in order to limit immigration to the United States (U.S. Department of State). Originally passed in 1868, the Burlingame Treaty gave Chinese people the rights to immigrate to the United States with little to no restrictions. China received national sovereignty and consuls in American ports while the United States received more access to Chinese products (Brennan). In 1882, Congress passed the *Chinese Exclusion Act*, which suspended the immigration of Chinese laborers for a period of 10 years. After this limitation, many Japanese, Chinese, and Filipinos began migrating to the island nation of Hawaii, in search of labor. In 1892, Congress voted and passed the *Geary Act*, which renewed the Chinese Exclusion Act for another 10 years, and in 1902, the law also expanded to cover the newly acquired United States territories- Hawaii and the Philippines (U.S. Department of State).

According to author Yuko Kawai who wrote "Stereotyping Asian Americans: The Dialectic of the Model Minority and the Yellow Peril" the *Yellow Peril* refers to the "cultural threat, as well as economic, political, and military threats to the White race", which was highly heightened during World War II in the 1940s (Kawai 112). Kawai also states that,

"overlapped with the image of East Asia's large population size and the emergence of an Asian Imperial power, the presence of 'Oriental' faces in the United States evoked among White Americans an alarm that the yellow race might overtake the White nation by outnumbering and out-powering the White Race" (Kawai 113).

The government sanctions along with this mindset that Asians were a potential threat to white Americans may be one of the many influential factors that led to the use of yellowface and whitewashing in Hollywood films.



### Rise of “Fu Manchu”

The age of the “Yellow Peril” influenced one of the most detrimental portrayals of Asians in entertainment media in the form of “Fu Manchu.” Created in 1913, during the peak of the *yellow peril* fears, by English novelist Sax Rohmer, the character of Fu Manchu was described as “‘yellow peril’ personified, a renegade Chinese warlord and evil genius bent on world domination and the extermination of the white race” (Clark). The protagonist of these stories was a character named Nayland Smith, a good and proper Englishman who was, most importantly, *white*. The novels became extremely popular and in 1923-1924, were later adapted into over two dozen silent shorts in the U.K. starring Irish actor H. Agar Lyons as Fu Manchu (Clark).

In the mid-1920s, after the major success of the silent shorts, American film studio Paramount Pictures Corporation made a full-length talkie-film, starring Swedish-American actor Warner Oland as the titular villain in *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu*. Oland due to his prominent Asian-centric features, went on to play multiple Asian characters beginning with Fu Manchu (Trasvd). The movie premiered in 1929 and became one of the earliest film documentations of whitewashing as well as a villainous portrayal of East Asians in Hollywood (Appendix A; IMDb, *The Mysterious Dr.*). Oland later reprised his role for the sequels in 1930’s *The Return of Dr. Fu Manchu* and 1931’s *Daughter of the Dragon*, amongst other projects throughout the years. The most famous portrayal of Fu Manchu was in the 1932 MGM produced *The Mask of Fu Manchu*. Oland had moved on from the role, and Fu Manchu was played by famous English horror actor Boris Karloff, best known for his work as “Frankenstein’s Monster” (Mank, 63).

The initial release of *The Mask of Fu Manchu* was met with severe criticism by the Chinese government and the Chinese-American community (Steffen). At the time of its release, “The Chinese consul in Los Angeles protested and the film has since existed uneasily in the realm of guilty pleasure” (French). Unlike the previous film incarnations of the character, *Mask*

had the actor Boris Karloff in yellowface with more apparent face makeup to enhance the 'eastern features': "along with the pointed ears and false eyelashes, were the long fingernails." (Appendix B; Mank, 67). The film also had more explicit dialogue such as the quote Fu Manchu used to rile up his followers, "Conquer and breed! Kill the white man and take his women!" (Clark)

Criticism was also thrown at the production's overly sexual depiction of Asian women, specifically in white actress Myrna Loy's portrayal of Fah Lo See, the Asian daughter of Fu Manchu (Appendix B). Loy had long been typecast as an "exotic temptress", and was not stranger to playing Asian women characters in yellowface, and this film proved no different (Steffen).

Despite the protest from the Chinese, *The Mask of Fu Manchu* went on to be a critical and financial success, many praising the performances of Karloff and Loy. "Over the decades, he [Karloff] became the screen's definitive, most famous Fu Manchu, while Miss Loy's 'stock' Fah Lo See won praise as one of the most exquisite villainess of '30s melodrama... *The Mask of Fu Manchu* became the greatest horror comic book of Hollywood's Golden Age" (Mank, 83). The movie made an impressive amount of money at the box office with a domestic gross of \$377,000, foreign gross of \$248,000, and a net profit of: \$62,000 (Mank, 83).

Over the years, the Fu Manchu trend continued from the 1930s to as far as the 1960s. In 1972, MGM, the movie studio responsible for *Mask*, planned to theatrically release "a horror classic triple bill: *The Mask of Fu Manchu*, Tod Browning's 1935 *Mark of the Vampire*, and the Rouben Mamoulian 1931 *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*." The Asian American community was not pleased citing the racist and incorrect portrayals of Asians, and "On May 7, 1972, *Variety* reported that the Japanese-American Citizens League had fired off a letter to MGM requesting that *The Mask of Fu Manchu* 'be removed from its catalogue immediately' and protesting that the 40-year-old movie was 'offensive and demeaning to Asian-Americans'" (Mank, 85).

### The “Sympathetic Asian” in Charlie Chan

According to Dolores Tierney from *The Independent*, “Whitewashing exists historically and contemporaneously in Hollywood because from its early and silent period Hollywood has, as Daniel Bernardi points out in *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness* ‘constructed whiteness as the ‘norm’”(Tierney). This “normalization” of the Caucasian face has led to dozens of films with white actors donning yellowface to be acceptable in the film community (Blay). One such example would be the “Charlie Chan” movies, which came out in the early 1920s. Originally penned as six novels by American novelist Earl Derr Biggers, the protagonist of the wildly successful novels, Charlie Chan, was based on a real Hawaiian Chinese policeman who had been neglected in history (Huang). English professor Yunte Huang spent years researching Earl Derr Biggers and the real-life subject Biggers took inspiration from- a policeman by the name of Chang Apana recruited to work for the Honolulu Police Department (Weiss and Weiss). According to Huang, “Apana ‘was a 5-foot-tall Cantonese cop on Honolulu in the 20th century. Originally, Apana had worked as a *paniolo*, or Hawaiian cowboy. In 1898- the same year that the United States officially annexed Hawaii- he joined the police force” (Huang).

As the only Chinese officer in the force mainly dominated by Hawaiians and white chiefs, Chan’s adventures were legendary. “He was said to be as agile as a cat. Thrown from a second-floor window by a gang of dope fiends, he landed on his feet. He leaped from one rooftop to the next, like a ‘human fly’” (Lepore). The adventurous, Chinese-Hawaiian cowboy figure was then transformed by writer Biggers into a stereotypically wise detective in the police force. With over four dozen Charlie Chan films made since 1926, while Chan the character was inspired by the real Apana, the portrayal of the character was adapted and depicted very differently (Weiss and Weiss). In real life, Apana was small but still tough, while the onscreen detective was “portly, formally dressed, and effeminate in his movements” (Huang). In the more well-known Charlie Chan films, the detective wasn’t played by actors of Chinese descent, but

rather by Swedish actor Warner Oland of *Fu Manchu* fame, and American actor Sidney Toler (Appendix C; Huang).

From the mid-1920s, in the first screen adaptation of the Charlie Chan novels, which were silent films, it is important to acknowledge that the actors playing Charlie Chan were of Asian descent (“*A Charlie Chan Chronology*”). Japanese actor George Kuwa was the first to take on the Chinese character in the 1926 serial, *The House Without A Key* (IMDb, *George Kuwa*). In 1926, Biggers published *The Chinese Parrot*, another Charlie Chan mystery novel. The novel was then made into a silent film starring Japanese actor Kamiyama Sojin (Peterson). Currently, no print of either *The House Without a Key* or *The Chinese Parrot* survives (IMDb, *George Kuwa*).

In 1929, Biggers published *Charlie Chan Carries On* and sold 35,400 copies in its first four months of publication (Lepore). In 1930, with the success of the novels continuing, film studio Fox Film Corporation greenlit the first talkie-film adaptation of Charlie Chan and cast Warner Oland as Chan in *Charlie Chan Carries On* (Appendix C; “*Warner Oland: Charlie Chan*”). Oland, who had risen in Hollywood fame for previously portraying the oriental villain *Fu Manchu*, had moved on to play another Asian, albeit a more sympathetic, character on screen. When Biggers heard that Oland was going to take on the role, he wrote to his publisher with trepidations that Oland would mischaracterize Charlie Chan as another *Fu Manchu* portrayal (Lepore). Upon seeing the film, Biggers was pleased with Oland’s performance, and was quoted to have said, “After all these weary years, they have got Charlie right on the screen” (Lepore). After the success of *Charlie Chan Carries On*, Fox made sixteen more films with Oland in the titular role before he passed away in 1939 (“*Warner Oland: Charlie Chan*”). Several other notable actors helmed the role after Oland’s passing, including American actor Sidney Toler and American Actor Roland Winters, neither of whom are Asian (Dunn).

While many modern-day critics in the United States condemn the use of “yellowface” in portraying the famous Chinese detective on film, Oland’s portrayal of Charlie Chan was actually embraced very positively by mainland Chinese audiences (Corrigan). In 1933, on a trip to Shanghai, Oland was acknowledged and commemorated by movie audiences for bringing to life in American film the first positive Chinese character (Corrigan). The only other portrayal of a Chinese person the mainland Chinese audience had previously seen was the villainous Fu Manchu. (Corrigan). Charlie Chan’s creation was a groundbreaking time in American history as the character was a fresh face to the stereotypes of sinister villains like Fu Manchu and the typical laundrymen regularly portrayed in film. The Chan character was “conceived as an anti-stereotype, but even that label is unfortunate, since it diminishes his stature as a complex, individual, and fully-developed character” (Breen).

The inspiration for the character himself, Chang Apana, was also a fan of the Charlie Chan films and became friends with Warner Oland’s (Appendix C). Apana was once offered to be paid 500 dollars to appear in a small cameo part for a Charlie Chan film, and politely declined the offer, though he did have great admirations for the stories (Dunn). Keye Luke, a Canton-born Chinese American actor who had acted alongside Oland in seven Chan films playing Lee Chan, Charlie’s first son, defended Oland’s portrayal of Charlie Chan. As he saw it, ‘we were making the best damn murder mysteries in Hollywood!’” (Lepore).

#### 1900’s and the Rise of Asian American Stars

In the early 1900s, although the majority of Hollywood was dominated by white stars, Asian American actors such as Sessue Hayakawa and Anna May Wong, were also on their rise to Hollywood and international fame (Buscher). From silent films to talkies, these two powerhouse actors fought against the stereotypes from Hollywood and played a major role in the depiction of Asians in Hollywood films for decades King, R).

### Hollywood's Sessue Hayakawa

Born in 1889 in Chiba, Japan, as Kintaro Hayakawa, Sessue Hayakawa came from a "long aristocratic line, and was sent to college in the United States. On his way back to Japan, Hayakawa stopped in Los Angeles and was recruited to perform in the Japanese Theater in Little Tokyo. For acting purposes, he ended up adopting the stage name of *Sessue Hayakawa* (Appendix D; Montgomery). In 1914, Hayakawa performed in a production of *The Typhoon*, and with major motion-producer Thomas H. Ince in attendance, the producer offered to adapt and sign Hayakawa to a silent film version with the original cast of the theatrical production (Montgomery).

Sessue Hayakawa flew into stardom with his performance in *The Cheat* directed by Cecil B. DeMille (Bean 92). The 1915 film depicted Hayakawa as the Asian leading man who has an affair with the white actress Fanny Ward. In the movie, Hayakawa's actor wins Ward's character over with his charms and overwhelms her with passion (Bean 92). This bold storytelling move scandalized many audiences, becoming a huge hit due to its "taboo" depiction of interracial sex, and solidified Hayakawa as an international star (Blazeski). Hayakawa's fame as a Hollywood star was so high that "Miyatake Toyo, a Japanese photographer working in American in the early 20th century called Hayakawa 'the greatest movie star of this century' and described a scene of female fans throwing their fur coats at the star's feet to prevent him from stepping in a puddle" (King, R).

Hayakawa's career continued to soar and he became a male sex symbol and one of Hollywood's highest-paid actors (Blazeski). Despite his growing popularity, Hayakawa was still burdened with the Hollywood tendency to typecast, and was criticized by the Japanese-American community of portraying them in a villainous light (Worrell). In the 20 films made with Paramount studios, Hayakawa was always portraying either the exotic love interest, or the friend who gives up the love of the female heroine (goldsea, *Sessue Hayakawa the Legend*).

Hayakawa was aware of the distress, and even acknowledged it when it was reported that, “he told a fan magazine the year after the release of ‘The Cheat’ that the roles he had been playing ‘are not true to their Japanese nature... They are false and give people a wrong idea of us” (King, R).

Tired of the roles offered, Hayakawa left Paramount in 1918 after his contract ended and established his own production company, Haworth Pictures Corporation (Bean 93). He borrowed \$1 million from a Chicago classmate’s family and by 1920, was netting \$2 million a year in profits (Montgomery). The films produced by Haworth often starred Hayakawa with his wife, Tsuru Aoki, and were focused on telling Asian-themed stories and “often reflected Hayakawa’s ‘crossover’ fantasies and American Dream aspirations of interracial tolerance and social accommodation” (Worrell). The most critically acclaimed film to have been produced by the production company was 1919’s *The Dragon Painter*, a romantic silent film starring Hayakawa and Aoki. Based on a 1906 novel by Fenollosa, the movie was directed by William Worthington and filmed in Yosemite Valley, which doubled as Japan (goldsea, *Sessue Hayakawa the Legend*). In the film, Hayakawa plays an “artist, an ‘untamed genius’ in love with the spirit of a dragon princess” (Saltz).

The 1920s proved to be a problematic time for Japanese sentiment post-World War I, and Hayakawa’s films began to perform poorly at the box office, up to the point where he was eventually forced off the screens (King, R). Hayakawa returned to Japan to continue his career, but struggled to book work, being viewed by Japanese audiences as an American who poorly portrayed the Japanese race (Worrell).

In 1931, Hayakawa returned to American film in his first talkie, the last Warner Oland-led Fu Manchu feature, *Daughter of the Dragon*, with actress Anna May Wong (Appendix D). Hayakawa was met with criticism for this role as “his heavy accent and his Japanese nationality made him a tough sell to the movie-going public” (King, R). It was felt that “when Japan

revealed its expansionist ambitions and invaded China in 1937, the Chinese and Japanese changed places as “the bad guys” (391). In the context of history, this began the Hollywood film portrayals of Japanese people as villains while the Chinese became the unintentional victims. The end of the silent film era, along with the growing tension between the United States and those of Japanese descent as World War II began to brew, led Hayakawa to once again, retreat from America (Blazeski).

Years after, Hayakawa returned to the United States one last time to take a third stab at the Hollywood industry (Blazeski). In 1957, he starred in the British-American war film, *The Bridge on the River Kwai* alongside actors William Holden, Jack Hawkins, and Alec Guinness. The movie was nominated for 8 Academy Awards and won 7. Hayakawa was nominated for Best Supporting Actor, the first actor of Asian descent to be nominated for the category, and lost to Red Buttons in *Sayonara*, another film with Asian stars (oscars.org, *The 30th Academy Awards*). Hayakawa regarded his role as Colonel Saito in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* as “the high point in his career” (Montgomery).

#### The Fierce Anna May Wong

Meanwhile, Hayakawa’s *Daughter of the Dragon* co-star became a bona fide star in her own right. Anna May Wong, born “Liu Tsong”, was considered to be Hollywood’s first Chinese-American film star of the silent film era, and beyond (Appendix E; akamoto). Born and raised in Los Angeles, in 1922, Wong appeared in her first starring role at age 17 in silent and first Technicolor film *The Toll of the Sea* (Appendix E; Sharp, J). The movie followed a similar storyline to that of the popular opera *Madame Butterfly* in which the American white male lead seduces a young Asian girl into falling in love with him only to leave her in favor of his more exquisite white female wife. Wong played the lead named “Lotus Flower”, and despite the repeated storyline, many critics praised Wong’s performance, saying “the theme is really a



sympathetic one made doubly interested and sincere by the splendid work of Anna May Wong” (Chan, A., 2003).

After receiving much critical praise, in 1924, Wong then starred in the Douglas Fairbank-directed *Thief of Baghdad*, playing an exotically beautiful slave girl (“Anna May Wong”). Despite the praise and success of the movie and her continued rise in stardom, Wong left the United States for Europe in 1928 after tiring of Hollywood’s limited roles offered (Rugo). She continued to be typecast as two Asian stereotypes: a submissive and sacrificing “Butterfly” or a cunning and aggressive “Dragon Lady”. Sick of these choices, Wong and opted instead to make films in France, Germany, and England, and solidified herself as an international star (Engel).

In 1932, Wong returned to the US to star in the Josef von Sternberg film *Shanghai Express* alongside German-American actress Marlene Dietrich. The film saw Wong “standing shoulder-to-shoulder alongside the top-billed Marlene Dietrich as one of a pair of good-times girls” (Appendix E; Sharp, J). This movie also starred Warner Oland who, once again, was cast to play an Asian in the role of Henry Chang, a mysterious Eurasian man (Dixon). The film was a critical and financial success, and was nominated for three Academy Awards (oscars.org, *The 5th Academy Awards*). Wong received much criticism from the Chinese press, and a local Chinese newspaper wrote that Wong was “the female traitor to China,” while a journal in Tianjin carried the headline: ‘Paramount Uses Anna May Wong to Embarrass China Again’” (Corliss, *That Old Feeling*).

In a 1932 review of *Shanghai Express*, the *New York Times* critic Mordaunt Hall praised Dietrich for her performance, and regarding Wong, stated that, “Warner Oland is excellent as Mr. Chang, and Anna May Wong makes the most of the role of the brave Chinese girl” (Hall). Although the Chinese government criticized Wong’s work as a betrayal to the Chinese, two recent authors of separate Anna May Wong biographies acknowledge that Wong, “worked hard to make even her smallest roles as Chinese as possible, using authentic hairstyles and

costumes (frequently drawn from her own extensive collection)” (Chamhi). In Wong’s own statements about the criticism, Wong was hurt by the attacks. ‘It’s a pretty sad situation,’ she said, ‘to be rejected by the Chinese because I am too American.’ (Corliss, *Anna May Wong Did It Right*).

### The Hays Code and its Lasting Effect

In 1930, a major shift in Hollywood films began with the release of The Major Motion Production Code, also dubbed the “Hays Code” after Will H. Hays, the president of the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) from 1922-1945. Beginning with its enforcement in 1934, the Code was a set of industry rules and moral guidelines governing American filmmaking, listing out the acceptable vs unacceptable content in Hollywood films (Mondello). One of the most important rules that influenced the future films of Hollywood was that “‘miscegenation’- relationships between black and white people cannot be displayed on screen (Vincent). Although the rule was defined specifically for the mixing of black and whites due to segregation, in reality, the rule morphed into “the prohibition of any sexual encounters between actors of different races” in Hollywood films (Morgan). This move was inevitably detrimental to the career of actress Anna May Wong.

In 1931, author Pearl Buck published the novel, *The Good Earth*, which later won the American novelist the Nobel Prize for Literature (Corliss, *That Old Feeling*). Wong had yearned to play the role of O-Lan, the lead Asian heroine, and in 1935 when rumors of an adaptation was in the works, Wong campaigned to be considered for the role. Author Pearl Buck was said to have had lunch with an MGM executive, and was quoted saying that, “‘I hoped they would use Chinese actors in the leading parts,’ to which he replied, “this was impossible due to the American star system” (Corliss, *That Old Feeling*). The character of O-Lan was that of a woman with a rich backstory and beautiful character development who was most importantly, Chinese.

Wong was deemed perfect for the role, and the character was a positive step away from the usual “Dragon Lady” roles Wong had continuously been offered (Rugo).

The main skepticism of Wong’s consideration came from MGM producer Albert Lewin. In an evaluation of Wong’s screen test, Lewin was unimpressed and was quoted to have said, “a little disappointing as to looks. Does not seem beautiful enough to make Wang’s infatuation convincing; however, deserves consideration” (Corliss, *That Old Feeling*). Resistance also came from the Chinese government, who advised that Wong’s casting would be, “very bad... whenever she appears in a movie, the newspapers print her picture with the caption ‘Anna May again loses face for China’” (Corliss, *That Old Feeling*). In 1935, Wong was tested several times for the MGM producers and unbeknownst to her, was actually never seriously considered for the role. They had already cast the white actor Paul Muni as the romantic male lead, Wang, and planned to put him in yellowface makeup (Appendix F; Rugo). With the Hays Code in full effect at this time, although Muni would have been playing an “Asian man” wearing makeup, Wong’s casting would have been impossible. A depiction of an interracial relationship between the two leads would have broken the movie code rules.

Instead, Wong was offered to test for the part of Lotus, a character following the stereotypical trend of being a villainous seductress of the main character (Rugo). Wong famously declined the role and said, “I’ll be glad to take the test, but I won’t play the part. If you let me play O-Lan, I will be very glad. But you’re asking me- with Chinese blood- to play the only unsympathetic role in the picture featuring an all-American cast portraying Chinese characters” (Sakamoto). The studio didn’t budge, and ended up casting German-actress Luise Rainer as O-Lan, and Austrian actress Tilly Losch as Lotus (Corliss, *That Old Feeling*). Both white actresses donned yellowface makeup to play the parts of the female Asians in the film (Appendix F). The movie was nominated for five Academy Awards. To add insult to injury, Rainer, donning yellowface makeup for the role of O-Lan, ended up winning an Academy Award for Best Actress

for her performance (Kelly). This win solidified Hollywood's notion to overlook the casting decision made, and even reward the film for its use of yellowface (oscars.org, *The 10th Academy Awards*). Even worse, the entire movie featured a cast of white leads in yellowface makeup, while actual Asian actors were sprinkled throughout the movie in the background to act as extras (Lim).

### WWII and Anti-Japanese Propaganda

After the critical and financial success of *The Good Earth*, MGM decided to adapt another Pearl S. Buck novel into a film. Published in 1942, *Dragon Seed* takes place in 1937, before the Japanese invasion of China, and tells the story of Jade Tan, a young Chinese peasant woman, who rallies her village to resist the incoming Japanese invaders (Kruseka). The film is said to have an underlying political agenda for its time as the world was still raptured with WWII and the animosity against Japanese and Japanese-Americans in the United States. MGM, the studio behind *Dragon Seed* was one of many Hollywood studios that "consented to the government's request to make propagandistic films that would praise the Chinese (the allies) and condemn the Japanese (then enemy)" (Levy, *Dragon Seed*). Even with this mindset, the cast consisted of Hollywood white stars in yellowface makeup, most notably with Katharine Hepburn as the *Jade Tan*, Turhan Bey as her husband *Lao Er Tan*, Walter Huston and Aline MacMahon as *Ling Tan* and *Ling Tan's Wife* respectively, and Akim Tamiroff as *Wu Lien*, the lead antagonist (Appendix G; IMDb, *Dragon Seed*). Rounding out the rest of the ensemble cast were other white actors, and of the 33 speaking roles in the movie, only 3 were designated for actors of Asian descent (Porter, 412). Instead, most of the background actors who played fellow villagers alongside Hepburn were performed by ethnic Asians, even though the leads were white actors (Wong). To make matters worse, despite the rising tension between the Chinese and the Japanese, "there are a few genuine Chinese in the cast- most of them playing Japanese!" (Erickson). The studio's excuse for this casting choice was that, "there were no

Japanese actors around” as they were all forced by the United States government to relocate to internment camps (Levy, *Dragon Seed*).

*Dragon Seed* was released in 1944 and received mixed reviews. None of the reviews criticized the yellowface put on by the actors, but heavily condemned the acting performances. Most notably, the *New York Times* criticized Hepburn’s performance of being “brittle and non-resilient throughout, and is constantly betrayed by an accent she has made into her own trademark sophisticated drama” (K.P.P.). The lack of consistency in the accents used by every actor throughout the film was firmly denounced. One critic stated, “the heavy speech of Akim Tamiroff falls upon the ear as resonantly as the sound of a gefilte fish banged against a temple gong... “(K.P.P). The criticisms on the accents also outlined a misconception many Americans had at the time- a belief in which all Chinese people were incapable of speaking without an accent despite the presence of actress Anna May Wong, who spoke perfect English without an accent. The “Asian accent”, along with yellowface, were the essence of what made up Asians in Hollywood.

Another Hollywood film that portrayed Japanese people in an unsophisticated light was the 1956 comedy film *The Teahouse of the August Moon*. The story is set in 1946, post-World World II as Japan was in their rebuilding period. It follows the story of an American Captain and his commanding officer sent by the US government to help the tiny village in Okinawa americanize as they rebuild. The two Americans are assigned a local Japanese translator by the name of Sakini, played by white actor Marlon Brando (Appendix H; IMDb, *The Teahouse of the August Moon*). For the role, Brando sported heavy yellowface makeup that consisted of, “a wig, rubber lids around the eyes and thick layers of yellowish greasepaint” (Appendix H; Gattig).

Although the film was meant to be a satirical comedy between the East and West, Brando took his performance to a whole other level. Despite not being Asian or of Asian descent, Brando campaigned hard for the role of Sakini and spoke of his desires to, “make

movies with a social message, to build bridges between cultures” (Gattig). For his research into the role, Brando was said to have spent two months recording and listening to a Japanese friend’s taping of the lines in an accent in order to achieve the correct Japanese pronunciation, so he wouldn’t be dubbed over (Gattig). The lack of actual comedy depicted in the film was criticized, and as a first, the New York Times wrote about the yellowface in the film.

“Mr. Brando’s appearance as Sakini... is also broad and bounding, shot through with grimaces and japes, but somehow it lacks the warmth and candor that are called for in the role. In the first place, Mr. Brando looks synthetic. A conspicuous make-up of his eyes and a shiny black wig do not imbue him with an oriental cast... (Cowther).

Despite all the work Brando had put into the role, it did not excuse the yellowface used in the film, when other Asian actors were cast as secondary characters in the film, or were sidelined entirely from even being considered for the lead role (Appendix H).

#### Repeal of the Hays Code and Anti-Miscegenation

After more than 20 years, Hollywood filmmakers began to slowly shift from following the Hays Code in making their movies. The times were changing and with the introduction of television, the Hays Code was slowly revised, and then later abandoned for a modern-day rating system (Mondello). In 1956, the anti-miscegenation law responsible for Anna May Wong getting passed over for the role of O-Lan in *The Good Earth* was finally removed in the Hays Code revision (Sun). This meant that Hollywood filmmakers were welcome to cast and depict a lead interracial couple in their films without being threatened that their movies would not be screened in America (Mondello).

A result of this 1956 film-rules revision was the release of the Warner Brothers produced film *Sayonara*. According to modern-day film critic Emanuel Levy, director Joshua Logan was fascinated with Japanese culture and encouraged his friend James Michener to write a story of modern Japan in hopes of putting it up as a Broadway musical (Levy, *Sayonara*). In a rare

stance from that of typical Hollywood at that time, Logan “envisioned a multi-cultural cast, with Japanese artists performing their arts” (Levy, *Sayonara*). With the success of his previous films *Picnic* and *Bus Stop*, Logan decided to take it straight to Hollywood.

Fresh off his other Japanese-centric film *The Teahouse of the August Moon*, Marlon Brando returned to Japan to shoot and star in *Sayonara* (Gattig). Unlike his previous film where he wore yellowface to perform a Japanese character, Brando starred as Lloyd Gruver, an American Air Force Major assigned to a Japanese air base (Appendix J). The plot follows Gruver, “an embodiment of a star soldier”, as he is challenged on his beliefs when a close friend of his, Joe Kelly, played by Red Buttons, falls in love with a Japanese woman, Katsumi, played by Miyoshi Umeki, and marries her. Gruver himself gets entranced by Hana-ogi, played by Miiko Taka, a Japanese theatre performer, and begins to cast doubts on the rules and regulations set and enforced by the United States military (Hartmann).

A rarity of its time, the movie paints the Japanese people in a more positive light post-World War II, in part due to Brando’s involvement in the film. During the production and development process of *Sayonara*, Brando was very adamant about the accurate portrayal of the Japanese culture and its traditions (Mizruchi). He was instrumental in re-working parts of the script to make it more culturally accurate, and was also intent on “enlightening Japanese as well as American audiences on the subject of interracial romance” (Appendix J; Mizruchi). One of the most significant changes was the ending to the script, which was changed from the traditional doomed “Madam Butterfly” ending seen in many US-meets-Eastern Asian romance-war films, to an ending that did not demonize interracial marriage, but with a result that was “a ‘natural outcome’ of love” (Mizruchi). According to Brando himself, this allowed the film to be, “an example of the pictures I wanted to make, films that exerted a positive force” (Mizruchi).

Apart from its interracial romance, the film also had a subtle anti-war sentiment and addressed the US military in its continued war involvements. Although fictional in its story and

characters, the movie actually followed the historical thread of actual cases of interracial marriage in the military, and pointed out “the hypocrisy of the US Army for allowing thousands of enlisted men to marry Japanese women and then barring the women from entering the United States effectively forcing the men to choose divorce or exile” (Mizruchi).

*Sayonara* went out to be a massive critical success, with critics praising Brando’s acting and the unconventional rewrite of the old ‘Madame Butterfly’ tale (Crowther). The movie received 10 Academy Award nominations, winning four at the 30th Annual Academy Awards in 1958. Brando was nominated for Best Actor, and lost to Alec Guinness in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, which starred Sessue Hayakawa, who lost the Best Supporting Actor award to Red Buttons (oscars.org, *The 30th Academy Awards*).

Miyoshi Umeki’s Best Supporting Actress win for *Sayonara* was history-making (Appendix J). She became the first Asian of any gender to win an acting award, and remains to this day, the only Asian actress to win an Academy Award for acting (Li, *Why Did Miyoski Umeki*). Umeki’s win also pushed the image of the passive and submissive stereotypical role of Asian women, especially that of Japanese women, who were seen as “coy and doll-like.” (Li, Shirley, *Why Did Miyoski Umeki*). Nevertheless, Umeki went on to star in the stage production of *Flower Drum Song* and received a Tony nomination for her performance, as well as a Golden Globe nomination in its film adaptation (Li, *Why Did Miyoski Umeki*).

### *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*

In 1961, the American classic, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, was released. The movie is known to have the most notorious display of yellowface, which is still analyzed to this day. The American romantic comedy starred Audrey Hepburn as Holly Golightly, an eccentric New York socialite, and George Peppard as Paul Varjak, a writer who has recently moved into the apartment building. The character to be scrutinized is I.Y. Yunioshi, the angry upstairs neighbor and landlord of the apartment played by Mickey Rooney in yellowface makeup. In the film, white



actor Rooney sports a set of thickly-framed glasses, taped eyelids, and a set of false buck teeth, a parallel of many stereotypes used in anti-Japanese WWII propaganda (Appendix K; Lou).

As the movie was released sixteen years after the atomic bombs were dropped in the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki signifying the end of World War II, the anti-Japanese sentiment along with the return of the Yellow Peril remained on everyone's mind (Rey). Throughout the war, the Yellow Peril, in the form of fearing the Japanese, was consistently represented in the US media as "an obedient, cruel, efficient, and homogenous 'herd' that single-mindedly carried out Japanese leaders' dreams of global domination" (Sharp, P., 434). Albeit for comedic purposes, Rooney's portrayal of the character continued to enforce the stereotype that Japanese men were dangerous and untrustworthy.

In the original book, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* Mr. Yunioshi was a Japanese American from California, which one would think means that the character speaks English. Instead, in the film, Rooney portrayed the character as one who spoke in, "a virtually incomprehensible English in a manner that is stereotypical of how Asians whose first language is not English speak" (Rey). Rooney is also depicted performing stereotypical Japanese tropes such as sleeping on the floor of his apartment and conducting a solo tea ceremony (Rey). An interesting note is that Richard Shepherd, the film's producer, had originally suggested that Mr. Yunioshi be recast with a Japanese actor while George Axelrod, the film's screenwriter, suggested "removing the character of Mr. Yunioshi from the film because of its offensiveness" (Lou). However, despite the protest and its potentially racist connotation, the director Blake Edwards insisted the character be in the film and that Rooney should play the role.

Although critics from 1961 were not very focused on Rooney's use of yellowface in the movie, modern-day critics, especially Asian-Americans, denounced the character and deemed it racially offensive (Magagnini). In 2008, a screening of the movie in the city of Sacramento was protested by the Council of Asian Pacific Islanders Together for Advocacy and Leadership

because Rooney's exaggerated Japanese character perpetuated, "offensive, derogatory, and hateful racial stereotypes detrimental and destructive to our society" (Magagnini). The Sacramento City Council replaced the free film screening with Disney's *Ratatouille* as a result of the protest. In response, Mickey Rooney stated that, "Never in all the more than 40 years after we made it- not one complaint. Every place I've gone in the world people say, 'God you were so funny.' Asian and Chinese people come up to me and say, 'Mickey, you were out of this world'" (Magagnini). In 2011, an outdoor screening at Brooklyn Bridge Park was protested by an Asian-American group, and Ursula Liang, a Bronx documentarian who started the online petition made the statement:

Why any publicly funded organization in a city where 1-in-8 residents are Asian-American or any channel with a huge Asian-American viewership would choose to show a film with a racist caricature like this is beyond me... By screening this film, the organizers are sanctioning the racism it contains, and subjecting new audiences (including children and Asian-Americans) to a minstrel show of racist ideology. It's 2011. It's New York. Do we still have to fight the hostile, hurtful world of 1961 Hollywood? (Liang and Huges)

In response, the head of the Brooklyn Bridge Corp., Regina Myer, said that the agency "recognizes that one character in the 'Breakfast at Tiffany's' movie is an offensive stereotype but this does not negate the value of the film as an American classic" (Calder).

With all the modern-day backlash, it was reported by Asian activist Jeff Yang that Paramount, the studio behind *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, has actually acknowledged the character as a "toxic caricature" and in a stance to combat that, has released a *Centennial Collection DVD* of the film with a companion documentary called *Mr. Yunioshi: An Asian Perspective* (Yang, J). The documentary, which was released in 2009, featured many Asian American performers and

advocates including Marilyn Tokuda, Guy Aoki, Phil Lee, and Jeffrey Scott Mio speaking about the “roles lasting cultural impact and the broader context of Asian and other racial stereotypes in entertainment” (Yang, J). To this day, the film remains an American classic. In 2012, the United States Library of Congress picked it as one of the 25 films that were deemed “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant” and was selected for preservation in the National Film Registry (King, S).

### The Modern Day: Social Media Movements

The 21st century has been fairly clear of yellowface, with the exception of *Cloud Atlas* (2012), and instead, Asians faced another casting hurdle. As opposed to using yellowface makeup to make an actor Asian, Hollywood has opted to cast white actors in the roles that were meant to be portrayed by people of color, a phenomenon known as “whitewashing.” Movies such as *21* (2008) and *The Social Network* (2012), which are based on true stories and real events, had white actors playing embodying the roles of characters who in real life were Asian.

In recent years, with the availability of technology, many Asians in the industry have started speaking out against yellowface and whitewashing. Notably on social media engine Twitter, multiple hashtags and movements have begun responding to the continued lack of accurate representation of Asian Americans (Yang, H). In April 28, 2016, a hashtag, *#StarringJohnCho*, accompanied by a series of well-known movie posters with the leading man photoshopped over for the face of Korean-American star John Cho, went viral on Twitter. Created by the then-25 year old digital strategist and activist, Will Yu, the social movement “literally shows you what it would look like if today’s Hollywood blockbusters cast an Asian-American actor- specifically John Cho, as their leading man” (Appendix L; Yu). Yu states that his inspiration for the movement came from noticing that Asian-Americans were being left out of the *#OscarsSoWhite* campaign, another social movement that called out the Hollywood whitewashing at the Academy Awards (Rogers). According to Yu, the *#OscarSoWhite*

conversation felt like a “two-sided argument. You had a white issue, and you had an African-American issue” and once again, Asians were excluded from the conversation (Rogers). Yu’s influence was also sparked from the results of the 2016 UCLA Hollywood Diversity Report that states, “only 1% of lead roles in film go to Asians” (Yu).

Around the same time in 2016, in the midst of the whitewashing controversy involving the casting of Tilda Swinton in *Doctor Strange* and Scarlett Johansson in *Ghost in the Shell*, another Twitter hashtag, *#whitewashedOUT*, also went viral. The movement was started by editor-in-chief of *Nerds of Color* Keith Chow, Young Adult fiction author Ellen Oh, and comedian Margaret Cho, because it is “important for studios and moviegoers to know that the way Asian Americans are presented (or not, in many cases), is wrong” (Wang). According to Chow’s website, aside from acting as a glaring message for Hollywood studios, producers and casting directors to stop casting white people in Asian roles/roles for people of color, it also serves as a message for “white actors to stop ACCEPTING these roles” (The Nerds of Color, *#WhitewashedOUT Twitter*). The movement took off as thousands of Asian Americans went on the social website to share their *#whitewashedOUT* grievances. One tweet, from Brooklyn-based comedian and writer Hari Kondabolu states, “capitalism fuels Racism. Whites are cast over Minorities, not out of hatred, but because of the assumption of higher profit *#whitewashedOUT*”. Actress Margaret Cho tweeted “we are just the ‘sidekick’. I’m sick of it. *#whitewashedOUT*”.

Another social movement that went viral came from the mind of Thai-American content creator, Michelle Villemaire. Following the leads of *#StarringJohnCho* and *#whitewashedOUT*, Villemaire debuted a photography project on her blog, *homemademimi.com*, called “Correcting Yellowface” (Appendix M). The project re-imagined Villemaire taking on various roles throughout Hollywood history that originally cast white actresses to be Asian in yellowface (King, J). From Luise Rainer in *The Good Earth* to Katharine Hepburn in *Dragon Seed* to Emma Stone in *Aloha*,

the yellowfaced and whitewashed pictures displayed the possibility of what it rightfully would have been like to have an Asian actress playing an Asian character (Villemaire, Appendix M). Villemaire also cited actress Anna May Wong, and the history behind *The Good Earth* overlooking Wong for the role of O-Lan as another large influence on the project (Ramtahal).

While whitewashing throughout history has been influenced by the political and historical climate of clashing of cultures between the East and West, examples of whitewashing in film can be seen as recently as the past five years (Sharf). Occurrences expanded from more than white actors taking on roles of Asian characters, but roles generally based on characters of color (Sharf).

#### Research Question and Methodology

The research questions in this study are: 1) is why is yellowface, including whitewashing, still a modern-day occurrence in Hollywood films, and 2) Does the casting of non-Asian actors in roles based on original source material in which the characters were written as Asian have a financial impact on the success of the film?

This thesis was a qualitative analysis of the history of yellowface in Hollywood, and an overview of modern-day occurrences of whitewashing in movies released within the last 5 years. I chose three movies with relevance on how they are categorized: *Aloha* (2015) is an original work not based on any pre-existing property, *Doctor Strange* (2016) is a blockbuster movie based on a pre-existing property with a significant following, and *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) is an adaptation based on a pre-existing property of Asian, namely Japanese, descent. A fourth additional movie, *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), was also analyzed as it was the first movie in 25 years with a worldwide release starring a predominantly-Asian cast. *Crazy Rich Asians* was also included in order to compare whether or not a film with a diverse Asian cast could affect the financial box office earnings. Research for each movie included background context on the pre-production process as well as information relevant on decisions made to whitewash the film.

Research Background: *Aloha* (2015)

In 2015, the romantic comedy film *Aloha* written, produced, and directed by Cameron Crowe, was released in theatres (Appendix N). The movie had already been in hot water prior to its 2015 release, with many native Hawaiians calling out the problematic cultural appropriation in the title of the movie (Associated Press, *Some Native Hawaiians*). The film was in development for years, and as early as 2008, director/writer Cameron Crowe had the movie titled as *Deep Tiki* (Chitwood). When the film went into production in 2014, its working title was *Hawaii* (Keane). Ultimately, the film was released under its current title *Aloha*, which in the Hawaiian language, is deep-seated in meaning: “Aloha actually comes from two Hawaiian words: ‘alo’ - which means the front of a person, the part of our bodies that we share and take people in. And ‘ha’ - which is our breath. When we are in each other’s presence with our bodies, we are exchanging the breath of life” (Associated Press, *Some Native Hawaiians*). Another Native Hawaiian activist voiced concern that the romantic comedy, despite being set in Hawaii and a military story, would end up bastardizing and profiting off the Hawaiian word and cultural setting with no regards to the actual richness of the Hawaiian culture (Associated Press, *Some Native Hawaiians*). However, not every native Hawaiian criticized the use of ‘Aloha’ and instead, believed that it embraces the Hawaiian culture and spirit. TV and radio personality Kimo Kahoano defended the movie’s title stating that “Hawaii is the best place in the world. And the reason is aloha” (Associated Press, *Some Native Hawaiians*).

The second and more important controversy arose with the casting of Emma Stone as Allison Ng, a character who was described to be *hapa haole*, a Hawaiian term that refers to a person of Hawaiian and white descent. In the movie, Ng’s father is half-Chinese and half Hawaiian while her mother is Swedish- this mix effectively makes Ng  $\frac{1}{4}$  Hawaiian (Jung, E. Alex, *Casting Emma Stone as Allison Ng in Aloha*). People began to ask why Emma Stone, an

actress who is 100% of European ancestry, was cast to play a character who is half Asian. In fact, Stone was the first to be officially confirmed to star in the film. (Chitwood).

In an apology and justification for the whitewashing, Cameron Crowe wrote on his personal blog that “Captain Allison Ng was written to be super-proud ¼ Hawaiian who was frustrated that, by all outward appearances, she looked nothing like one. A half-Chinese father was meant to show the surprising mix of cultures often prevalent in Hawaii.” (Crowe). A statement released by the Media Action Networks for Asian Americans (MANAA), further criticized the ensemble cast stating, “Caucasians only make up 30% of the population, but from watching this film, you’d think they make up 90%” and that this movie joins the long list of films that “uses Hawaii as its exotic backdrop but goes out of its way to exclude the very people who live there.” (MANAA, *MANAA Condemns Sony Pictures*). Although Crowe provided a significant surplus in jobs, many Asian actors were shut out from receiving an employment opportunity.

Actress Emma Stone ultimately acknowledged the wrongful miscast, the history of whitewashing and how prevalent it continues to be, and how this incident had ignited a much-needed conversation (news.com.au, *Emma Stone I’ve Become*). The casting of Allison Ng would have been a great opportunity for Crowe to take a big leap and cast any actress of Asian descent in the role, or make it even more specific by casting an actress of Hawaii descent (Jung, E. Alex, *Casting Emma Stone as Allison Ng in Aloha*). Instead, he went with white actress Emma Stone.

#### Research Background: *Doctor Strange* (2016)

Popular franchise films have also had run-ins with whitewashing. *Doctor Strange*, is an American superhero movie which premiered in November 2016 (Appendix N). The film is based on the Marvel Comics character of the same name and first appeared in 1963. With historical context, the 1960s were plagued with stories of mysticism and magic, which heavily inspired the “Strange” character and storyline (Yamato). The MCU film follows a similar origin story like that

of the comic books, as it chronicles the story of Doctor Stephen Strange, played by British actor Benedict Cumberbatch, who is a brilliant yet arrogant New York neurosurgeon. After Strange gets injured in a car accident, his hands are deemed inoperable, and he is forced out of work.

A Celtic mystic called the Ancient One, takes Strange under her wings and begins to train him in the mystic arts. The movie received criticism for its casting decision for the character of the Ancient One, who in the movie is given an androgynous look, and is portrayed by British actress Tilda Swinton. In the original comics, the Ancient One was often portrayed as a male Tibetan while Wong, a supporting character, came from a line of Chinese servants loyal to the Ancient One. Director and writer Scott Derrickson spoke about his experience adapting the 1960s comic book into a movie fit for the 2016-era, and how it meant many of the 60s Asian-influenced stereotypes of what Western white people thought Asians were like had to be rewritten (Yamato). Derrickson wanted to avoid the “white savior” complex with the Ancient One, who in the comic books is portrayed as the “Fu Manchu magical Asian on the hill being the mentor to the white hero” (Yamato).

Before the script even became a draft, Derrickson made the decision to change the Ancient One’s gender portrayal from being a male to a female. This was a significant step not just for inclusion in the film, but also inclusion in the overall Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), which has received much criticism for its lack of strong female roles in the dozen and more featured films (Yamato). However, despite being a step forward for gender inclusion, the decision came with a cultural exclusion.

Derrickson consulted the executives at Marvel about casting an Asian female actress to play the Ancient One. “When I envisioned that character being played by an Asian actress, it was straight-up Dragon Lady” said Derrickson (Yamato). Looking past the history of films and the typecasting of Anna May Wong as a Dragon Lady, Derrickson decided to avoid another bad stereotype by effectively erasing the Ancient One’s Asianness. So in turn, the movie version of



the Ancient One was changed to Celtic, with actress Tilda Swinton in the role. Despite the ethnic change, the movie kept its film set in the mountains of Kathmandu, Nepal, another Asian country, as opposed to Tibet. A *Doctor Strange* co-writer, C. Robert Cargill, was candid on the reason behind the racebending decision: politics. According to Cargill, if the Ancient One was a character from Tibet, it could be detrimental to the box office due to Tibet's long-standing feud with China (Watt). The Chinese government, with the Communist Party in charge, has the power to prohibit the distribution of any films that denounces social or political topics. In this case, China has claimed that Tibet has been and continues to be a territory for over seven centuries, although many Tibetans refute the claim saying they have been independent for that entire time (Watt). To Cargill's point, the choice to make the Ancient One Tibetan could lead to the alienation of over a billion people, a ban of the movie in China from the Chinese government, and the potential of turning into a bigger international issue (Watt). MANAA President Rob Chan put out a statement that criticized Derrickson's choice of moving from Tibet to Nepal and questions why an Asian actor/actress would not have been able to take on the mantle (Yee). Chan also pointed out that due to the popularity of the Disney/MCU brand, casting an Asian would have significantly boosted the career and made a potential Asian star out of the person chosen to portray the Ancient One. Founding MANAA president Guy Aoki also criticized the *Doctor Strange* team's rationalizations stating that, "the Ancient One was racist and stereotyped, but letting a white woman play the part erases all that? No, it just erases an Asian character from the screen when there weren't many prominent Asian characters in Marvel films to begin with" (Yee). As Aoki pointed out, Tilda Swinton, a white actress who has the ability and starpower to afford turning down roles, was cast while "white actresses are seen on screen more than Asians of any gender" (Yee).

Actress Tilda Swinton, confused on the backlash received, reached out to Asian actress and outspoken activist against "whitewashing", Margaret Cho, for insight on what was stirring in

the media. Cho stated, “our stories are told by white actors over and over again and we are at a loss on how to cope with it” (Demby). Cho later stated she felt as though the conversation was a “fight” between her and Swinton, and expressed how she “felt like a house Asian; like I’m her servant”, and vented her frustration on the strange interaction, hoping Swinton would “get it,” and understand why this incident was one of over hundreds of incidents in the 100 years of history Asians have been struggling to fight for proper representation (Demby).

Research Background: *Ghost in the Shell* (2017)

*Ghost in the Shell* is a 2017 American science-fiction movie based on a Japanese manga series originally published in 1989 (Appendix N). The original manga was set in the mid 21st century of Japan where the protagonist, Major Motoko Kusanagi, leads a counter-terrorist organization. In this fictitious future in which computer technology has significantly advanced and many individuals possess cyberbrains. The protagonist, Major Motoko Kusanagi, who, after a terrible accident as a child requiring her to use a full-body prosthesis for her cyberbrain, is a cyborg.

The 2017 movie was set in a futuristic world and starred Scarlett Johansson as the lead. Differing from the manga, the main character was changed from Major Motoko Kusanagi to Major Mira Killian, who after a terrorist attack that kills her family, is chosen as a test subject in which her brain is integrated to an artificial body. At the very end of the movie, Killian uncovers her true identity as the *Japanese Motoko*.

The movie’s controversy first stirred in January 2015 with the announcement of Scarlett Johansson cast as the lead role in *Ghost in the Shell*. A petition amassed over 100,000 signatures calling on Dreamworks to recast the role of Major to be an actress of Japanese descent (Rose). Despite the uproar, the movie studio went on with the casting of Johansson, and the fuel was once again ignited in 2016 with the first promotional photo released of Johansson in costume as her character Major. After the release of the photo, high-profile

actress Ming-Na Wen tweeted a response to the photo saying, “Nothing against Scarlett Johansson. In fact, I’m a big fan. But everything against this Whitewashing of Asian role” (Chan, M).

Things got more complicated when it was reported “Paramount and Dreamworks commissioned visual effects tests that would’ve altered Johansson in post-production to ‘shift her ethnicity’ and make the Caucasian actress appear more Asian in the film” (Sampson). According to an insider, once the tests were developed, the idea was immediately rejected by the production team (Sampson). Paramount acknowledged the use of the VFX but said they had no further plans to use the effect (Sampson). Asian-American actress Constance Wu tweeted, “way to reduce race to mere physical appearance as opposed to say culture, social experience, identity, history” (Chan, M).

In response to all the backlash, Steven Paul, one of the producers for *Ghost in the Shell*, defended the casting choice. Paul, who grew up watching Japanese films and reading manga, referred that the movie universe of *Ghost in the Shell* is set as “an international world” (Cheng). He continued that, “we’re utilizing people from all over the world... there’s Japanese in it, there’s Chinese in it. There’s English in it. There’s Americans in it” (Cheng). The director of the film, Rupert Sanders, stood behind his casting decision, and stated that Johansson is, “incredibly intuitive, she’s got both a toughness and a softness that I really feel the Major has. It was a character she could relate to” (Ng) He also felt her prior roles in *Under the Skin* and *Lucy* had given her the ability to handle the duality of playing a human and an android (Ng).

Reactions wildly differed from people overseas, especially in Japan, where the source material originated. Mamoru Oshii, the director responsible for the 1995 animated feature adaptation of *Ghost in the Shell*, felt there was no basis for saying that an Asian actress must portray her (Osborn). Many Japanese fans had already assumed the lead role would go to a white actress (Blair). There were still some fans who were disappointed a non-Japanese actress

was taking on the role, but others express that it could've been a worse choice had they cast any non-Japanese Asian actress. One fan expressed that, "at least they didn't cast a Chinese actress, like they did in *Memoirs of a Geisha*" (Blair). Others felt that as the character and its central plot was centered around artificial bodies and technology, the casting decision of Major's race shouldn't matter (Blair).

Unlike the United States, the Japanese had less concern with the issue of yellowface and racebending as the Japanese are the majority race in its own country. Many residents of Japan hold the ideology that they care more about the cultural ties of an Asian face, and look down on replacing one ethnic race for another (Blair). MANAA President Robert Chan stated how distressing it is that "apparently, in Hollywood, Japanese people can't even play Japanese people anymore" and condemned the casting of Johansson, as well as the casting of white actor Michael Pitt as Kuze/Hideo, the main villain of the film (MANAA, *MANAA: 'Ghost in the Shell'*). MANAA Founding President Guy Aoki criticized Mamoru Oshii and the mainland Japanese fans saying "many in Japan have been so brainwashed by Western culture that they've developed an inferiority complex of their own. They assume that in order for a film to be successful, it has to star a white actor" (MANAA, *MANAA: 'Ghost in the Shell'*).

#### Research Background: The Road to *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018)

In August 2018, one of the most highly-anticipated movies geared up to premiere. From its cultural significance to how the film might impact the future of representation, *Crazy Rich Asians* carried a lot of cultural weight on its shoulders before the movie even released (Appendix N). The film is based on a 2013 book of the same name, written by Singaporean-American author, Kevin Kwan, who wrote a satirical view based on his affluent childhood upbringing in Singapore (Gross). Following the premise of the book, *Crazy Rich Asians*, a romantic comedy film, echoes the story of Chinese-American college professor, Rachel Chu, as she takes a trip with her boyfriend, Nick Young, to Singapore for his best friend's wedding.

Unbeknownst to Chu, Young's family is one of the richest in all of Singapore, with Young being Singapore's most eligible bachelor. The film follows Rachel as she first-hand experiences the extravagance of Singapore while trying to win over the approval of Nick's mother, Eleanor.

The novel was published in 2013 and became an international bestselling success (Wittmer, C., *We Talked To 'Crazy*). The rights to the film adaptation were instantly up for option, and in a bold move, Kwan optioned the rights to Color Force and Ivanhoe Pictures for \$1 (with clauses in place to earn more as the production got made), in exchange for the right to be involved in the developmental decisions of the movie (Wittmer, C., *We Talked To 'Crazy*). Kwan made this decision after a disastrous pitch meeting in which a producer said "it's a pity you don't have a white character," and recommended Kwan change the lead character, Rachel Chu, from an Asian heroine to a white woman because otherwise, there would be no interest in the film (Ford and Sun). The main producers from Color Force along with Ivanhoe Pictures, were all in line with Kwan's vision of bringing the film to life with an Asian cast.

From 2013 to 2016, the film went through pre-development and producers approached a few possible contenders to direct the film, all of whom were of Asian descent (Ford and Sun). Coincidentally, Jon M. Chu, a Chinese-American director, was on the hunt for a project that hit a little closer to home. Chu, who had been in tune with the Twitter-sphere protests of *#StarringJohnCho* and *#whitewashedOUT*, sought to work on a project that could help explore his own Chinese-American ancestry (Ford and Sun).

After a pitch presentation in which Chu brought out old photographs of the people in his life, many of whom were Asian and had majorly influenced his filmmaking career path, Chu segued his pitch to the producers on a concept of making a change to show the world Asians as what they were never seen as before (Sperling). With a vision of "contemporary, stylish, at the top of art and fashion, emotional, funny, sarcastic and unapologetic," Chu had plans of combatting every previous portrayal of Asians in the media (Ford and Sun). In a *Vanity Fair*

interview, producer Nina Jacobson recalled how impactful Chu's pitch was as it highlighted Chu's idea and understanding of going to Asia for the first time and the experience in grappling with the personal identity struggle of being an American first (Sperling). Chu eventually received the approval of the producers, and began the process by bringing aboard Malaysian-American screenwriter, Adele Lim, for script re-writes.

In an effort to find the best of the best to fill out its 76 speaking parts, most of which needed to be cast with Asians, Chu teamed up with Warner Bros. for a worldwide open-casting call for the film. Chu recorded and uploaded a video on YouTube inviting people all over the world to upload their own two-minute audition videos on social media platforms using the hashtag *#CrazyRichAsiansCasting*, in order to be considered for a role. Chu felt that casting directors, through no fault of their own, had very outdated and/or non-existent lists of Asian actors to be considered (Tseng). This move was another takedown of the traditional Hollywood model, as it allowed anyone with a decent camera to have the chance of auditioning for big studio-budget Hollywood film. Chu even acknowledged the strength of Asians in new media such as YouTube, citing "there are people that I know are out there- because I watch YouTubers and know that there are independent films starring great Asian actors- who aren't on these lists" (Tseng). Aside from the open call, Chu also had teams of casting directors from Beijing, Hong Kong, Vancouver, Shanghai, the UK, the US, Australia, Malaysia, and Singapore scouting for any and all potential Asian talent for consideration. Chu approached actress Constance Wu for the lead role, and even pushed the production date back five months to accommodate her schedule (Wittmer, C., *We Talked To 'Crazy*). He also sought to recruit Chinese-Malaysian star, Michelle Yeoh, to play the part of the stern mother Eleanor Young.

Yeoh had looked into acquiring the rights option for the film herself, and made it adamantly clear to Chu that she had no intentions of portraying the typical tiger mom stereotype (Lhooq). In turn, Chu and Lim collaborated to nail the character nuance of Eleanor Young for

Yeoh, and also worked to incorporate cultural as well as emotional authenticity into the film (Ford and Sun). Rounding out the rest of the supporting characters are Asian actors from all around the globe: Chinese-Korean American actress Awkwafina, Korean American actor Ken Jeong, Chinese American actor Harry Shum Jr (in a cameo role), British actress Gemma Chan, British actress Sonoya Mizuno, Australian actor Chris Pang, Chinese American actor Jimmy O. Yang, Chinese-Malaysian-Australian actor Ronny Chieng, Australian actor Remy Hii, Filipino American actor Nico Santos, British actress Jing Lusi, Chinese-Filipino actress Kris Aquino (in a cameo role), American actress and YouTube singer Kina Grannis (IMDb, *Crazy Rich Asians*). A notable casting was *The Joy Luck Club*'s, Chinese American actress Lisa Lu as Ah Mah, Nick Young's grandmother in the movie.

The hardest casting came down to the character of leading-man heartthrob Nick Young. The man had to, of course, be Asian, "suave and debonair, with a 'JFK Jr.' appeal, while also being able to nail a perfect British accent" to reflect the characterization in the book (Jung, *There's Something About Henry*). Working with an already-small pool of potential Asian actors, Chu and his team struggled to find the perfect Asian leading man. This downturn ended when a colleague, Kim, recommended Chu look up Henry Golding, a handsome young Asian man who spoke with a British accent (Wittmer, *'Crazy Rich Asians' leading man*). Kim had remember Golding's work from years before, when he used to be a Singapore-based presenter and made travel videos for the BBC and Discovery Channel Asia (Jung, *There's Something About Henry*). Chu and Taylor succeeded in convincing Golding to audition and take the role. With that, they had Henry Golding, a man who had never acted prior to this movie, portray the leading Asian male character Nicholas Young (Wittmer, *'Crazy Rich Asians' leading man*).

Golding's casting was met with much controversy. Golding was born to a Malaysian mother and a British father. He lived with his family around the eastern peninsula of Malaysia before moving to Surrey, a city just south of London, when Golding was 8. At age 21, Golding moved back to

Malaysia, and stayed in the city of Kuala Lumpur, and then relocated to Singapore later in his life (Jung, *There's Something About Henry*). Even with Golding's international ties and immersion in Malaysian/Singaporean culture, many people on the internet criticized the casting saying "of course the leading man in the first Asian American movie in the past 25 years is half-white" (Li, *Crazy Rich Asians*). Henry Golding recalls how hurtful, yet expected the backlash was, as he had to deal with being biracial his whole life. He was initially afraid that people would criticize his being more Malaysian than Singaporean and instead, "how Asian do you have to be to be considered Asian? I've 16, 17 years of my life in Asia, and that's most of my life. I was born in Asia, I've lived cultures that are synonymous with Asian culture, but it's still not Asian enough for some people." (Li, *Crazy Rich Asians*). Nevertheless, Golding was chosen for the part.

*Crazy Rich Asians* hit another bump with the audience closer to home in Singapore, the country where the much of the movie is set. Ahead of its Singapore release date, many locals questioned the accurate representation of their country, citing that the film focuses more on Singapore's Chinese, the dominant ethnic majority, at the expense of other minority groups (Ives). However, the movie does include Filipino-American actor, Nico Santos, in a prominent supporting role, along with leading male Henry Golding (Ives). Singaporean author and gay rights activist Ng Yi-Sheng expressed in an email to the *New York Times* "judging from the trailers, the browner Asian characters are predominantly guards and domestic workers and drivers. That's kind of oppressive, don't you think?" (Ives). Singaporean journalist and activist Kirsten Han also had a similar question about representation stating that although the success of the movie can be considered a win for representation in the United States, as a movie starring an all-Asian cast, the *Crazy Rich Asians* book and movie are mainly a representation of characters of East Asian descent (Han). Singapore itself is a diverse nation of different Asians and the choice to obscure the Malay, Indian, Eurasian, and other minority groups is a



misrepresentation of the country itself (Han). The novelty of an all-Asian cast is not special as Singapore has media offerings from its surrounding neighbors: Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China (Han). Ahead of the film's release, actress Constance Wu posted on Twitter, "I hope Asian American kids watch CRA and realize that they can be the heroes of their own stories... For those who don't feel seen, I hope there *is* a story you find soon that *does* represent you... We're not at all the same, but we all have a story" (@constancewu).

Gearing up to show Hollywood that waiting 25 years for another movie starring an Asian cast telling a contemporary Asian story was much too late, a gathering of influential and affluent Silicon Valley venture capital and tech minds threw ideas around ahead of *Crazy Rich Asians'* August 15 release date (Yoon-Hendricks). The group planned to show up at the theater for its release, but also started a new social media movement called *#GoldOpen*. Inspired by references of gold being no. 1, and a need to reclaim the racially negative labels of "yellow" and "brown" being attributed to Asians, *#GoldOpen* saw hundreds of influential people - from creative leaders, to digital entrepreneurs, and even politicians- buying out theatres all across the country to host screenings of the film (Gardner). With a screening ticket range of \$1,000 to \$5,000 the movement attracted Asian influencers and organizations, and everyday people to chip in. The tickets purchased were given away to "people who should be seeing this movie- underserved communities and schools and students who should be watching this, that's who we're serving with this" (Gardner).

### Results and Analysis

In order to quantify and analyze the data of the four films above, I examined the box office grosses and budgets, and reactions by critics and the general public on the casting decisions for each movie. I also researched the projected US box office gross leading up to opening weekend, and made comparisons to the actual opening weekend box office numbers from movie industry financial data-tracking websites, *boxofficemojo*, and *the-numbers.com*. I

also analyzed the reviews from critics tracking mentions of a “whitewashing controversy” curated from websites such as *Rotten Tomatoes* and *Metacritic*, which are known for being the primary review-aggregated websites for film and television. In judging the financial “success” of a movie, I defined success based on whether or not a movie recouped the estimated production budget from its box office earnings through its entire theatrical run. With all these numbers accrued, I determined whether or not there is a correlation between the financial success of each movie and the decision to whitewash the film.

### *Aloha* (2015)

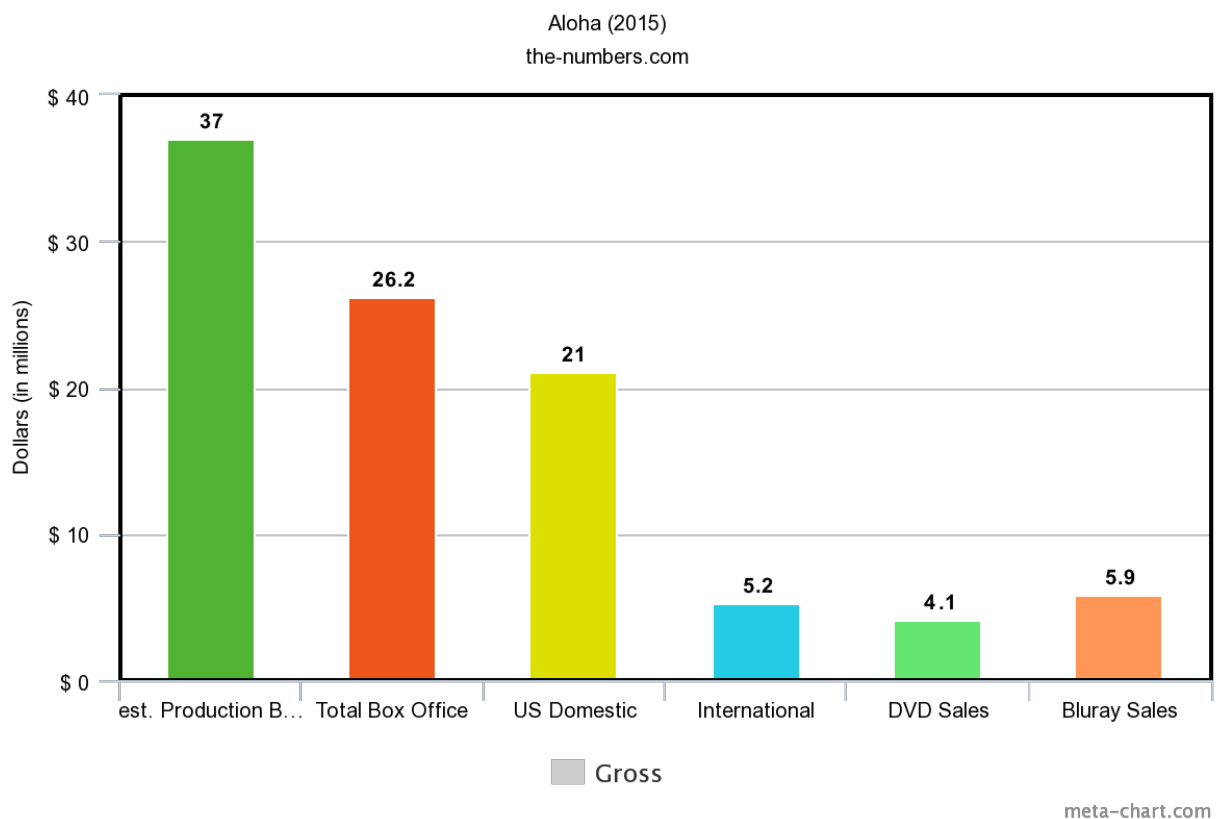
According to financial data-tracking website *the-numbers.com*, *Aloha* had an estimated production budget of \$37 million. *Aloha* had an unsteady journey hitting the big screens, as its original intended release day was scheduled for Christmas 2014, and according to the hacked Sony emails scandal, was slated to have an estimated overall box office gross of \$90 million through its entire theatrical run (bombreport, *Aloha* (2015)). The Sony emails also revealed that the studio had green-lit a marketing budget of \$48.3 million for the film, but the film was severely affected by the leaked emails with Sony executives disparaging the film as well as the backlash against Emma Stone’s casting (bombreport, *Aloha* (2015)). With all the controversies surrounding the film, *Aloha* was pushed back to be released in May 2015 and projected to make \$12 to \$15 million opening weekend (bombreport, *Aloha* (2015)).

According to box office revenue tracking website *boxofficemojo*, the movie opened #6 in 2,815 movie theaters across the United States, and had an opening weekend gross of \$9,670,235, totaling 64%-80% of its original estimated projections. Through its 63 days/9 week run in theatres, the movie had a domestic gross of \$21,067,116, with a foreign gross of \$5,182,904, totaling the movie with a worldwide gross of \$26,250,020, making back only 70% of its production budget (boxofficemojo, *Aloha* (2015)). After the movie theaters took their percentage of the gross, Sony only saw an estimated \$11.5 million in returns. The movie was

released in DVD/Blu Ray by Sony in August 2015, but the sales were also subpar: estimated domestic DVD sales of \$4,123,905, estimated Blu-Ray sales of \$1,769,423, for a total of \$5,893,328 in video sales (Table 1; the-numbers, *Aloha (2015)- Financial Information*).

Aside from the box office grosses, the film also suffered from poor critic and audience reviews. Review aggregator, *Rotten Tomatoes*, showed that, of the 160 critic reviews counted, the average percent of “Tomatometer-approved” critics who gave the movie a positive review was 20%, and out of 29,630 user ratings, only 27% of users rated the movie with 3.5 stars or more (rottentomatoes, *Aloha (2015)*). According to another review aggregator website, *Metacritic*, *Aloha* has a review score of 40% based on 36 critics, while the user reviews totaled 4.3/10 based on 126 reviews. A majority of the critic reviews denounced *Aloha* to be one of Cameron Crowe’s worst works, with many criticizing the choppy dialogue, nonspecific storylines, awkward pacing, and cliché used of music to spur up emotions from the audience (Metacritic, *Aloha*). Of the 36 critic reviews, roughly  $\frac{1}{3}$  of them mentions the “appropriating Hawaii” controversy and/or alludes to the casting choice Emma Stone as a part-Asian character. The *New York Times* review unequivocally points out huge flaws in the film and points out the use of Hawaii as a “superficial backdrop for the troubles of white people,” a sentiment also felt by many Native Hawaiians (Scott). Towards Stone’s casting decision, the *New York Times* also acknowledged the casting does little to help boost the film (Scott). Overall, despite its big A-list cast and crew, *Aloha* did not recoup the reported production budget cost required to make the film and was deemed a box office bomb. The critical and audience reviews were mainly negative, largely influenced by its writing and casting controversy. Overall, the whitewashing decision did little to help the financial success of the film.

Table 1. Aloha by the Numbers



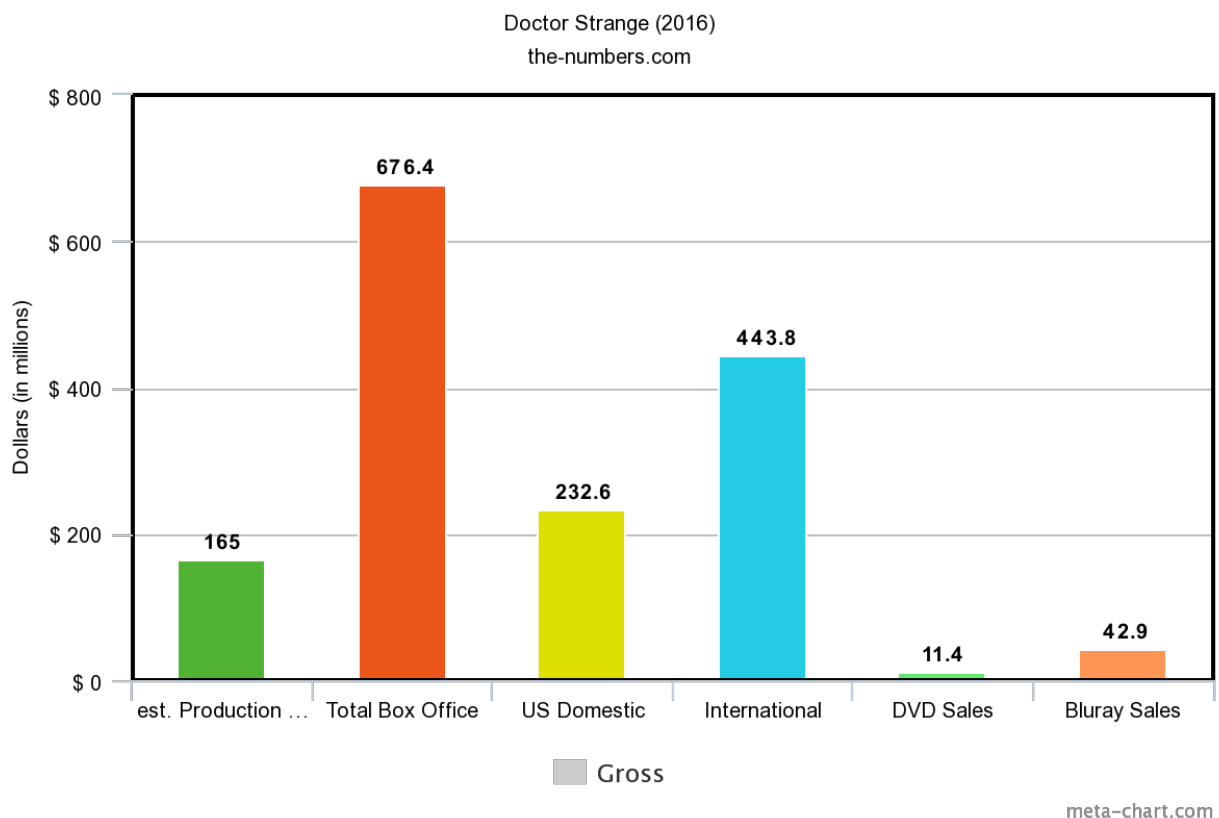
### Doctor Strange (2016)

*Doctor Strange*, a title tied in with billion-dollar superhero franchise of Disney's Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), had a more-than-impressive box office draw despite the casting controversy involving Tilda Swinton. According to *the-numbers.com*, the movie had an estimated production budget of \$165 million (Table 2). Three days before its November 4th release date, the 14th film in the MCU was projected by *Deadline* to have a roughly \$65-\$75million range in opening weekend box office gross (D'Alessandro, A., "*Doctor Strange*" Comes). According to *boxofficemojo*, the film opened #1 in 3,882 movie theaters in the United States with an opening weekend gross of \$85,058,311, making 113-130% more than the estimated opening weekend grossing. According to a *Hollywood Reporter* report, the movie is the first film to play in more than 1,000 IMAX theaters, which contributed \$12.2 million to the

domestic opening weekend grosses (McClintock). Through its 133 days/19 week run, *Doctor Strange* had a domestic gross of \$232,641,920, and an international gross of \$443,762,646, totaling to an overall gross of \$676,404,566 (the-numbers, *Doctor Strange (2016)- Financial Information*). The movie was released in DVD/Blu Ray by Walt Disney Home Entertainment in February 2017, with very strong sale numbers: estimated domestic DVD sales of \$11,442,139, estimated Blu-Ray sales of \$42,895,294, for a total of \$54,33,433 in video sales (Table 2; the-numbers, *Doctor Strange (2016)- Financial Information*). Also interesting to note was that the decision of changing the Tibetan influence was deemed a success for Disney, as the China box office Disney tried to placate ended up bringing in \$43,460,000 for opening weekend, and a total box office gross of \$110,300,300 (Table 2; the-numbers, *Doctor Strange (2016)- Financial Information*).

Aside from its impressive grosses, *Doctor Strange* was also deemed a critical success. According to review aggregator, *Rotten Tomatoes*, of the 347 critic reviews counted, the average percent of "Tomatometer-approved" critics who gave the movie a positive review was 89%, and out of 108,829 user ratings, 86% of users rated the movie with 3.5 stars or more (rottentomatoes, *Doctor Strange (2016)*). According to another review aggregator website, *Metacritic*, *Doctor Strange* has a review score of 72% based on 49 critics, while the user reviews total 8.2/10 based on 1,713 reviews (Metacritic, *Doctor Strange*). Despite being a lesser-known Marvel Comics character, critics praised the movie for its dazzling visual effects and its inviting detour from the typical Marvel superhero film (rottentomatoes, *Doctor Strange (2016)*). The film was a financial success, earning back four times its estimated production budget. The film was also a critical success, and was even nominated for an Academy Award for Best Visual Effects (oscars.org, *The 89th Academy Awards*). As it seems, the Tilda Swinton casting controversy did little to hurt the film's box office domestically in the United States and overseas in China.

Table 2. Doctor Strange by the Numbers



### *Ghost in the Shell* (2017)

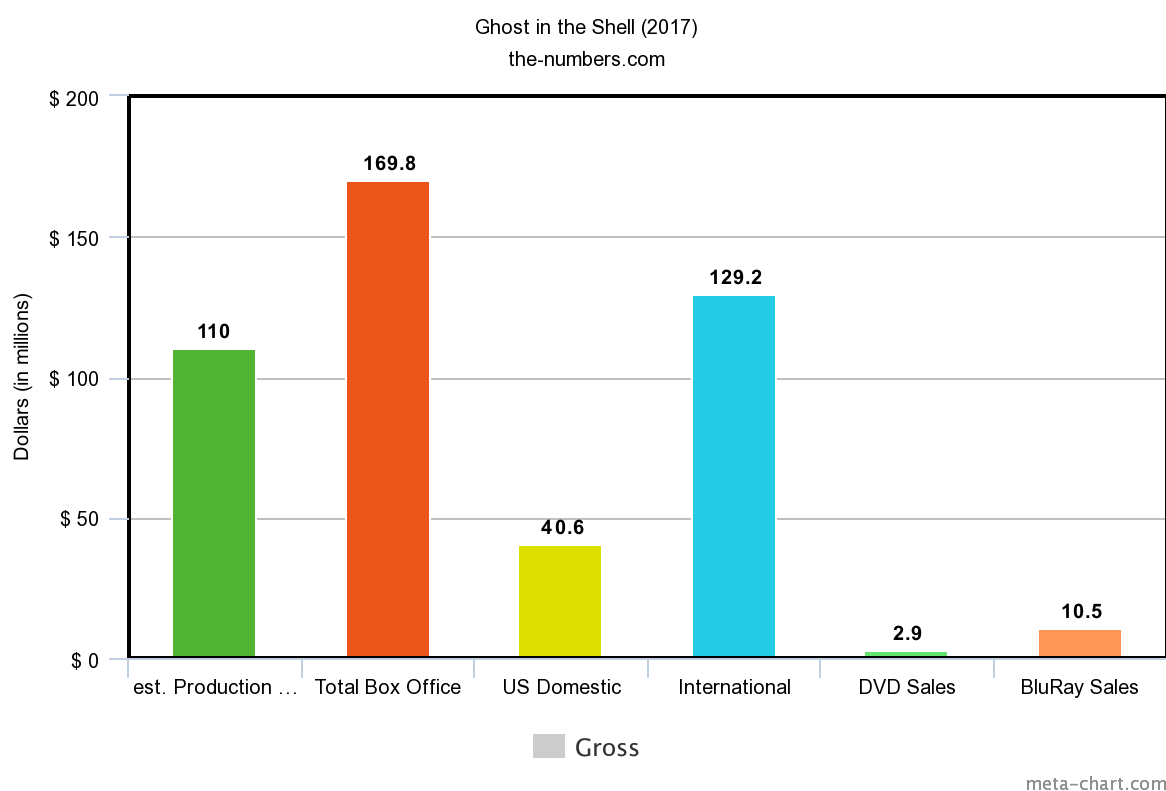
*Ghost in the Shell*, the Scarlett Johansson-led adaptation of a Japanese manga, had a rocky box office opening. Prior to its re-ignited casting controversy as the release date got closer, the film was slated to make a projected domestic opening weekend box office gross of \$25-\$30 million (D'Alessandro, "*Ghost in the Shell*"). After much chatter regarding the whitewashing controversy leading up to its March 31st release date, the box office projection dropped to \$18.6 million (D'Alessandro, "*Ghost in the Shell*"). With an estimated production budget of \$110 million, or according to *Deadline*, a budget closer to \$180 million, *Ghost in the Shell* had a lot of money to lose. According to *boxofficemojo*, the movie opened #3 in 3,440 movie theaters across the United States, and had an opening weekend gross of \$18,676,033,

totaling 62-74% of its original pre-controversy estimated projections (Table 3). Through its 56 days/8 week run in theaters, the movie had a domestic gross of \$40,563,557, with a foreign gross of \$129,238,364 totaling the movie with a worldwide gross of \$169,801,921 (Table 3; the-numbers, *Ghost in the Shell (2017)- Financial Information*). The movie was released in DVD/Blu Ray by Paramount in July 2017, but the sales also failed to help the movie recoup its budget. The movie grossed an estimated domestic DVD sale of \$2,933,198, estimated Blu-Ray sale of \$10,527,405 for a total of \$13,460,603 in video sales (the-numbers, *Ghost in the Shell (2017)- Financial Information*). After the movie theaters take their cut of the box office gross, the movie is projected to only return back \$93 million.

As the release date got closer, critical reviews of the movie also began to drop. According to *Deadline*, movie studio Paramount Pictures cite the casting controversy largely influenced a drop from the Wednesday, March 29th all-media screening *Rotten Tomatoes* score of 71% to a Thursday preview score of 45% (D'Alessandro, "*Ghost in the Shell*"). To make matters worse, the studio also influenced the drop in numbers when they held an embargo on reviews of the film until two days before its release date. In the end, review aggregator, *Rotten Tomatoes*, cite that of the 272 critic reviews counted, the average percent of "Tomatometer-approved" critics who gave the movie a positive review was 43%, and out of 39,750 user ratings, 51% of users rated the movie with 3.5 stars or more (*rottentomatoes*, *Ghost in the Shell*). According to *Metacritic*, *Ghost in the Shell* has a review score of 52% based on 42 critics, while the user reviews total 6.8/10 out of 944 reviews. (*Metacritic*, *Ghost in the Shell*). The overall critic consensus was that, "*Ghost in the Shell* boasts cool visuals and a compelling central performance from Scarlett Johansson, but the end result lacks the magic of the movie's classic source material" (*rottentomatoes.com*, *Ghost in the Shell*). According to a review from the *New York Times*, Johansson's casting choice has been highly criticized, and with the addition of Asian extras playing geishas in the film, it beckons the choice of making a twist of

Major not being Japanese- until she is. To quote the review, “this isn’t just appropriation, it’s obliteration” (Dargis). As for the success for the film, *Ghost in the Shell* managed to recoup its estimated production budget but with a measly \$40 million domestic gross, it is deemed a United States box office bomb. The film also had a significant box office boost internationally, making up 70% of its total box office revenue, a proof on how the whitewashing controversy may have little impact overseas. Critic and user reviews were overall mixed to negative, many of whom criticized the plot.

Table 3. Ghost in the Shell by the Numbers



### *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018)

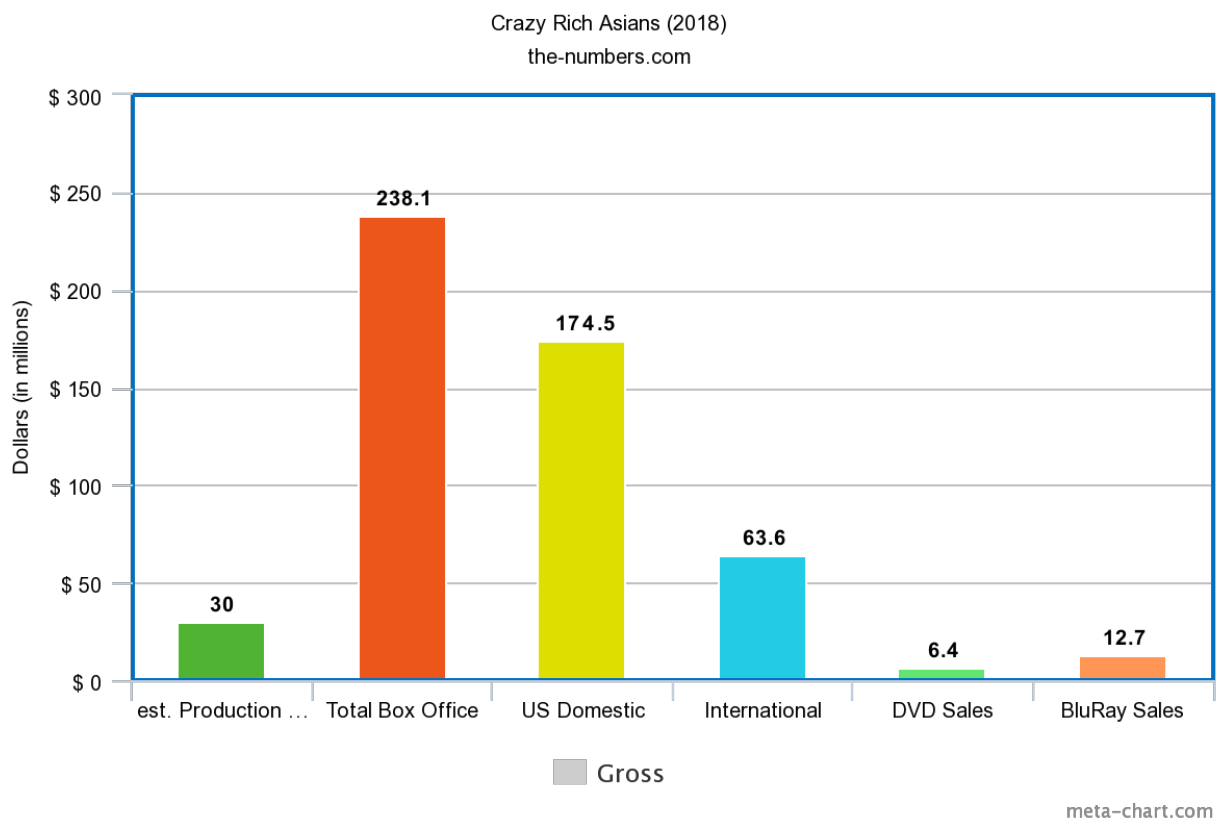
It is no secret *Crazy Rich Asians* had an immense pressure to do well at the box office. Time and time again, the movie is stated to be the first big-budgeted, studio backed, Asian-led film since *The Joy Luck Club* was released 25 years ago. Book writer Kevin Kwan and film director Jon. M. Chu turned down a seven-figure paycheck from Netflix so the world would get to see this film in



movie theaters (Ford and Sun). Weeks leading up to its 5-day opening weekend, *Variety* reported the romantic comedy film would have an estimated opening debut of \$20 million against a modest \$30 million production budget (Table 4). Leading up to the week of, *Variety* amended its estimation to a possible \$26 million opening debut, likely influenced by the early positive buzz and the #*GoldOpen* movement (Rubin). To track, according to *boxofficemojo*, the movie opened #1 in 3,384 across the United States, with an opening weekend gross of \$26,510,140 (*boxofficemojo*, *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018)). Through its run in theaters, the movie had a domestic gross of \$174,532,921, with a foreign gross of \$63,566,790, totaling a worldwide gross of \$238,099,711 (Table 4). The movie was released in DVD/Blu Ray by Warner Home Video in November 2018, grossing an estimated domestic DVD sale of \$6,353,362, a Blu Ray sale of \$12,727,735 for an overall sale of \$19,081,097 (Table 4; the-numbers, *Crazy Rich Asians- Financial Information*).

Early critic reviews were positive, and at a #*GoldOpen* event, actor Jimmy O. Yang made a surprise appearance with fellow co-stars and told the audience that, “we [the movie] currently have 16 reviews, and we’re at 100 percent!” (Yoon-Hendricks). As of Wednesday morning on August 15th, the official opening day, the movie had a score of 96 percent based on 67 reviews on *Rotten Tomatoes*- one of the founders for the review aggregator website, Patrick Lee, was a #*GoldOpen* backer (Yoon-Hendricks). Currently on *Rotten Tomatoes*, the website cites that of 319 critic reviews counted, the average perfect of “Tomatometer-approved” critics who gave *Crazy Rich Asians* a positive review was 91%, and out of 11,188 user ratings, 77% of users rated the movie with 3.5 stars or more (*rottentomatoes*, *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018)). According to *Metacritic*, *Crazy Rich Asians* has a review score of 74% based on 50 critics and a 6.9/10 score based on 235 user reviews (*Metacritic*, *Crazy Rich Asians*). *Crazy Rich Asians* is deemed a financial success, with the domestic box office grossing almost six times its estimated production budget. The overall critic and user consensus praised the movie for its step forward for screen representation and a new twist on the typical rom-com formula (*rottentomatoes*, *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018)).

Table 4. Crazy Rich Asians by the Numbers



### Research Question 1: Conclusion

The first research question asked why yellowface, including whitewashing, was still an occurrence in Hollywood films in the modern day. In conducting research for the four films, listed below are reasons creatives involved with the projects gave in defense of whitewashing their films:

- In *Aloha* (2015), the character of Alison Ng, inspired by a real life Hawaiian local, was only ½ Asian and the plot centered around her lot looking like one (thetelegraph, *Whitewashing and Blackface in Movies*)
- In *Doctor Strange* (2016), the decision to change the culture of Ancient One was fueled by the political and financial risk of alienating over a billion people and a potential movie ban from China (thetelegraph, *Whitewashing and Blackface in Movies*)

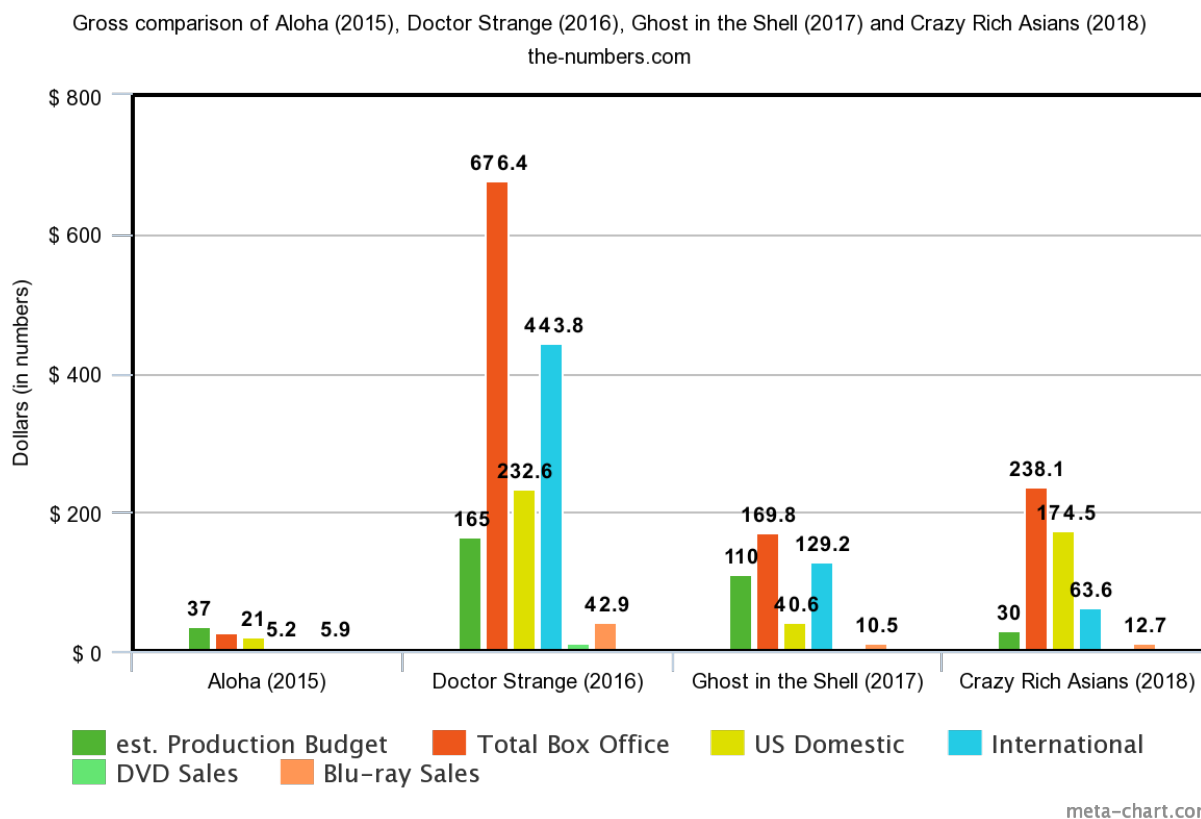
- In *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), the character is technically a cyborg and robots are not constrained by the humanistic characterization of being a part of a race (thetelegraph, *Whitewashing and Blackface in Movies*)
- In *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), actor Henry Golding addressed his whiteness and how his half-British ethnicity should not erase his predominantly-Asian cultural upbringing (General)

From the reasons listed above, we can conclude that the four movies made within the last five years justified their whitewashing decisions based on the need for “stars” for financial stability, pure ignorance on the issue at hand, character writing technicalities, and struggles between ethnicity and culture.

#### Research Question 2: Conclusion

The second research question was to determine whether the casting of non-Asian actors in roles based on original source material in which the characters were written as Asian have a financial impact on the success of the film. From these four cases, it is difficult to determine whether there is a correlation as to whether a whitewashing controversy affected the United States box office success of a film (Table 5).

Table 5. Comparison of the Four Movies by the Numbers



- Although *Aloha* was a critical and commercial failure, a large part of the result came from the general negative reviews of the material itself (rottentomatoes, *Aloha* (2015); Metacritic, *Aloha*)
- For *Doctor Strange*, the film's relationship with the Marvel Cinematic Universe and positive reviews on the visual effects was enough to save the film from financial backlash (rottentomatoes, *Doctor Strange* (2016); Metacritic, *Doctor Strange*)
- Judging from the box office numbers, *Ghost in the Shell's* poor reception may have to do with the fact that the Japanese-originating intellectual property is not as well-known to the general United States audience as the film did better internationally than domestically (Table 3).

- With the underlying pressure to do well, *Crazy Rich Asians* performed above and beyond projected financial numbers with many praising the diversity and representation seen on screen (Table 4; rottentomatoes.com *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), Metacritic, *Crazy Rich Asians*).

Overall, these four films have been crucial in forcing Hollywood to face its racial problems head-on, and while the numbers may be influenced by other issues, one thing for certain is the fact that it is sparking a much-needed casting conversation in the social sphere. An example of a whitewashing incident that started a conversation can be seen in 2017's casting of white actor Ed Skrien in the reboot of *Hellboy*. Based on a popular comic book series, Skrien was cast to play Major Ben Daimio who was originally written as Asian (Couch and Kit). Shortly after the social media backlash, Skrien posted a personal statement on his twitter dropping out of the project stating that, "Representation of ethnic diversity is important, especially to me as I have a mixed heritage family. It is our responsibility to make moral decisions in difficult times and to give voice to inclusivity. It is my hope that one day these discussions will become less necessary and that we can help make equal representation in the Arts a reality" (Couch and Kit). Skrien's decision to step down from the project was met with worldwide praise, and many Asian actors, including Daniel Dae Kim who was re-cast in the role, thanked Skrien for his decision to step down in support of proper representation (Mumford). Skrien's decision may be the beginning of many future white actors standing in solidarity with actors of color on the basis of casting.

The critical and commercial success of *Crazy Rich Asians*, along with 2018's black-led movie *Black Panther*, shows us that audience members are ready to commit to a new set of diverse faces on the big screen, and will do so with the only thing Hollywood looks for: money. As Hollywood continues to move forward, it is a hope for the industry that many executives take the chance to tell more diverse stories with the casting of culturally correct people for the part,

instead of brushing it off in favor of the white faces they are familiar with or who have had prior success making them money in the past.

#### Limitations and Opportunities for Further Research

One of the limitations for this study was that although the whitewashing controversy existed, there were other factors to consider that may have affected the grosses of a film. These included the time of year the film was released, the pre-existing fanbase, the competition with other films released at the same time, and the political and cultural climate at the time. Reviews are also limited as the aggregator websites do not reveal how they determine the overall percentage of a film's review.

An additional limitation is that the financial websites often estimate the numbers, which continuously update, while the production budget of a film is also estimated and excludes the cost of marketing and promotions done prior to the film's release. As well, there has been a lack of similar previous financial and critical research done for these film samples as they were released within the last five years. Overall, a precise conclusion on whether whitewashing affected the financial success of a film in the United States cannot be concluded, as correlation does not equal causation.

While the literature review is extensive, there are many other examples of yellowface and whitewashing not mentioned in this study. This study also focuses specifically on the whitewashing and yellowface controversies from the 1900s onwards in film, excluding theatre, television and new media. It may be useful in the future to research the rising trend of Asians appearing in television throughout the years, and the emergence of original content by Asian Americans on YouTube. With the success of *Crazy Rich Asians*, we have yet to learn whether the film's success will increase projects featuring Asians or further the casting of Asian stars in roles originally written for them.

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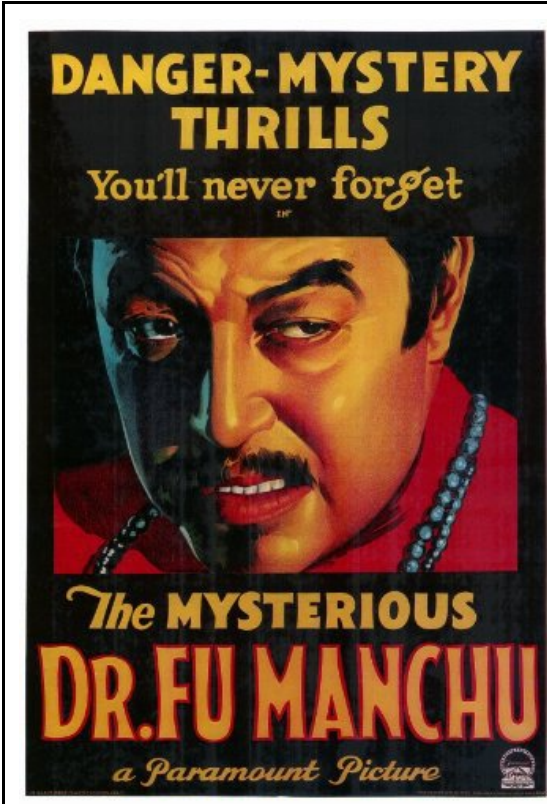
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Appendix A: *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu*



Pictured: Warner Oland as Fu Manchu in the movie Poster for *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu* (1929)

Source:  
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0020197/mediaviewer/rm1451934208>



Pictured from Left to Right: Jean Arthur as Lea Eltham and Warner Oland as Fu Manchu in *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu* (1929)

Source:  
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0020197/mediaviewer/rm3773959424>

Appendix B: *The Mask of Fu Manchu*

	<p>Pictured: Boris Karloff as Fu Manchu in <i>The Mask of Fu Manchu</i> (1932)</p> <p>Source:  <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0023194/mediaviewer/rm3523208448">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0023194/mediaviewer/rm3523208448</a></p>
	<p>Pictured: Myrna Loy as Fah Lo See in <i>The Mask of Fu Manchu</i> (1932)</p> <p>Source:  <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0023194/mediaviewer/rm787539200">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0023194/mediaviewer/rm787539200</a></p>
	<p>Pictured from Left to Right: Boris Karloff as Fu Manchu and Myrna Loy as Fah Lo See in <i>The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu</i> (1929)</p> <p>Source:  <a href="http://colorwebmag.com/2016/11/20/b eing-asian-in-hollywood-actors-directors-and-creators-talk-representation/boris-karloff-myrna-loy-the-mask-of-fu-manchu/">http://colorwebmag.com/2016/11/20/b eing-asian-in-hollywood-actors-directors-and-creators-talk-representation/boris-karloff-myrna-loy-the-mask-of-fu-manchu/</a></p>


Appendix C: Warner Oland and Charlie Chan

	<p>Pictured: Warner Oland as Charlie Chan in a promotional poster for <i>Charlie Chan Carries On</i> (1931)</p> <p>Source:  <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0021733/mediaviewer/rm1647451904">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0021733/mediaviewer/rm1647451904</a></p>
	<p>Pictured from Left to Right: Warner Oland as Charlie Chan and John Garrick as Mark Kenaway in <i>Charlie Chan Carries On</i> (1931)</p> <p>Source:  <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0021733/mediaviewer/rm1345462016">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0021733/mediaviewer/rm1345462016</a></p>
	<p>Pictured from Left to Right: Chang Apana, the real-life inspiration for Charlie Chan, with Warner Oland, the actor who portrayed Charlie Chan</p> <p>Source:  <a href="http://yellowbrickstudiousa.com/legacyvision-films/about-legacyvision-films/movies-filmed/the-legend-of-chang-apana/">http://yellowbrickstudiousa.com/legacyvision-films/about-legacyvision-films/movies-filmed/the-legend-of-chang-apana/</a></p>

Appendix D: Sessue Hayakawa

	<p>Pictured: Sessue Hayakawa circa 1915.</p> <p>Source:  <a href="https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0370564/mediaviewer/rm945395712">https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0370564/mediaviewer/rm945395712</a></p>
	<p>Pictured from left to right: Sessue Hayakawa as Ah Kee, Anna May Wong as Ling Moy, and Warner Oland as Fu Manchu in <i>Daughter of the Dragon</i> (1931)</p> <p>Source:  <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0021785/mediaviewer/rm1731337984">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0021785/mediaviewer/rm1731337984</a></p>

## Appendix E: Anna May Wong

	<p>Pictured: Anna May Wong</p> <p>Source:  <a href="https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0938923/mediaviewer/rm46344192">https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0938923/mediaviewer/rm46344192</a></p>
	<p>Pictured: Anna May Wong, aged 17, in <i>The Toll of the Sea</i> (1921)</p> <p>Source:  <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0013688/mediaviewer/rm2981454080">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0013688/mediaviewer/rm2981454080</a></p>
	<p>Pictured clockwise: Anna May Wong as Hui Fei, Warner Oland as Henry Chang, Marlene Dietrich as Shanghai Lily, and Clive Brook as Captain Donald Harvey in <i>Shanghai Express</i> (1932)</p> <p>Source:  <a href="https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0023458/mediaviewer/rm2292669440">https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0023458/mediaviewer/rm2292669440</a></p>

Appendix F: *The Good Earth*

Pictured: Paul Muni as Wang in *The Good Earth* (1937)

Source:

<http://canetoadwarrior.blogspot.com/2011/07/good-earth.html>



Pictured: Luise Rainer as O-Lan in *The Good Earth* (1937)

Source:

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0028944/mediaviewer/rm3709812736>



Pictured: Tilly Losch as Lotus in *The Good Earth* (1937)

Source:

[http://www.brianrxm.com/comdir/cnsmovie\\_goodearth.htm](http://www.brianrxm.com/comdir/cnsmovie_goodearth.htm)

Appendix G: *Dragon Seed*

Pictured: Katharine Hepburn as Jade Tan in a promotional poster for *Dragon Seed* (1944)

Source:

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0036777/mediaviewer/rm3286173696>



Pictured from left to Right: Turhan Bey as Lao Er Tan- Middle Son and Katharine Hepburn as Jade Tan in *Dragon Seed* (1944)

Source:

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0036777/mediaviewer/rm1077696512>

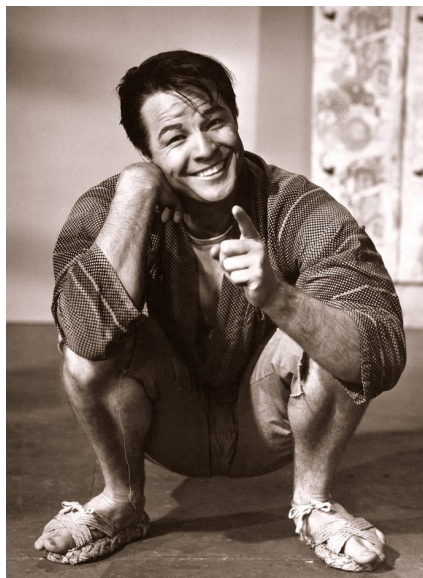


Pictured: cast of *Dragon Seed* (1944)

Source:

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0036777/mediaviewer/rm2891781376>

Appendix H: *The Teahouse of the August Moon*



Pictured: Marlon Brando as Sakini in *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956)

Source:

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0049830/mediaviewer/rm2721844736>



Pictured from top to bottom: Marlon Brando as Sakini, Glenn Ford as Capt. Fisby, and Machiko Kyo as Lotus Blossom in a promotional poster for *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956)

Source:

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0049830/mediaviewer/rm3584038144>



Pictured: Marlon Brando on set of *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956)

Source:

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0049830/mediaviewer/rm2321717248>



Appendix J: *Sayonara*

Pictured from left to right: Marlon Brando as Major Lloyd Gruver and Miiko Taka as Hana-Ogi in *Sayonara* (1957)

Source:

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0050933/mediaviewer/rm998545408>



Pictured from left to right: Marlon Brando as Major Lloyd Gruver, Miiko Taka as Hana-Ogi, Miyoshi Umeki as Katsumi, and Red Buttons as Joe Kelly in *Sayonara* (1957)

Source:

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0050933/mediaviewer/rm475543040>



Pictured from left to right: Red Buttons as Joe Kelly, Miyoshi Umeki as Katsumi, and Marlon Brando as Major Lloyd Gruver in *Sayonara* (1957)

Source:

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0050933/mediaviewer/rm260347904>

Appendix K: Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*



Pictured: Mickey Rooney as Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961)

Source:

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0054698/mediaviewer/rm2801665024>



Pictured from left to right: George Peppard as Paul Varjak, Audrey Hepburn as Holly Golightly, and Mickey Rooney as Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961)

Source:

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0054698/mediaviewer/rm108665088>



Pictured: Mickey Rooney as Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961)

Source:

<https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/off-color-casting-in-hollywood/>

## Appendix L: #StarringJohnCho



Pictured: #StarringJohnCho actor John Cho photoshopped onto the body of actor Chris Evans as Captain America in the *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) promotional poster

Source:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/570986f422482e7442e9f2f8/572113ff62cd9427a7db9f5b/5721140562cd9427a7db9f96/1461856469875/avengersaouintlposter.jpg?format=750w>



Pictured: #StarringJohnCho with actor John Cho photoshopped onto the body of actor Tom Cruise as Ethan Hunt in the *Mission: Impossible- Rogue Nation* (2015) promotional poster

Source:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/570986f422482e7442e9f2f8/572113ff62cd9427a7db9f5b/5721141b62cd9427a7dba07f/1461856496662/missionimpossible0006.jpg?format=750w>







Pictured: #StarringJohnCho with actor John Cho photoshopped onto the body of actor Joseph Gordon-Levitt as Tom Hansen in the *500 Days of Summer* (2009) promotional poster

Source:

[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/570986f422482e7442e9f2f8/572113ff62cd9427a7db9f5b/57408cc560b5e9c97678fa49/1463848429534/Cho\\_500.jpg?format=750w](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/570986f422482e7442e9f2f8/572113ff62cd9427a7db9f5b/57408cc560b5e9c97678fa49/1463848429534/Cho_500.jpg?format=750w)

Appendix M: Michelle Villemaire "Correcting Yellowface"

	<p>Left: Luise Rainer in <i>The Good Earth</i>  Right: Michelle Villemaire</p> <p>Source:  <a href="https://www.homemademimi.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/meandluise.jpg">https://www.homemademimi.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/meandluise.jpg</a></p>
	<p>Left: Katharine Hepburn in <i>Dragon Seed</i>  Right: Michelle Villemaire</p> <p>Source:  <a href="https://www.homemademimi.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/dragonsseedMEKate.jpg">https://www.homemademimi.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/dragonsseedMEKate.jpg</a></p>
	<p>Left: Myrna Loy in <i>The Mask of Fu Manchu</i>  Right: Michelle Villemaire</p> <p>Source:  <a href="https://www.homemademimi.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/MaskofFUand-ME.png">https://www.homemademimi.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/MaskofFUand-ME.png</a></p>
	<p>Left: Emma Stone in <i>Aloha</i>  Right: Michelle Villemaire</p> <p>Source:  <a href="https://www.homemademimi.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/AlohaMEandEmma.jpg">https://www.homemademimi.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/AlohaMEandEmma.jpg</a></p>

Appendix N: Movie Posters of Films Analyzed



Left: Promotional poster for *Aloha* (2015)

Source:

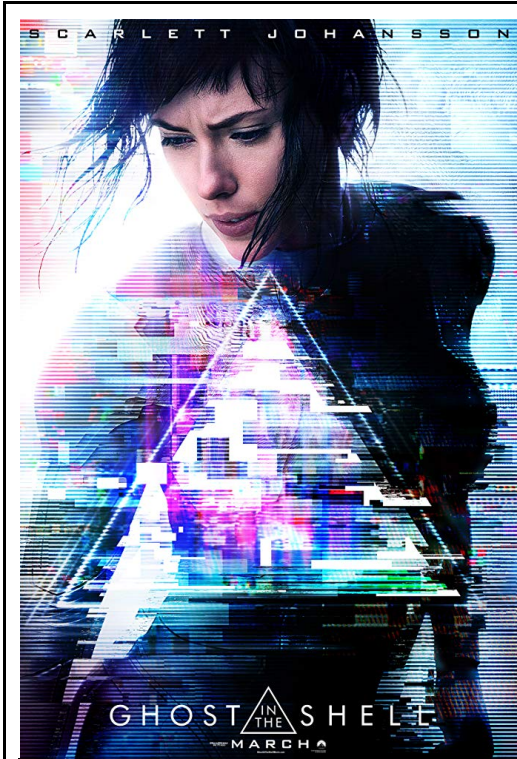
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1243974/mediaviewer/rm830665728>



Left: Promotional poster for *Doctor Strange* (2016)

Source:

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1211837/mediaviewer/rm3012758016>



Left: Promotional poster for *Ghost in the Shell* (2017)

Source:

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1219827/mediaviewer/rm2237348864>



Left: Promotional poster for *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018)

Source:

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3104988/mediaviewer/rm89476864>