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Globalization, Masculinity, and the Changing Stakes of Hollywood Cinema for Asian American Studies

Karen Fang

In 2002, Roger Ebert became a leader in Asian American issues. The well-known film critic and television personality enthusiastically praised Better Luck Tomorrow, a film by an Asian American director, Justin Lin, and starring an entirely Asian American cast. At the important Sundance Film Festival, where the film had screened, Ebert had been at the center of controversy when a white audience member upbraided Lin for making a movie so "empty and amoral for Asian Americans." During the ensuing debate, the critic fiercely defended the director's artistic freedom; because of Ebert's fame, the debate sparked numerous press reports that would further publicize the film. At one point using his familiar portly figure to command attention by jumping up on his theater seat, Ebert countered, "Nobody would say to a bunch of white filmmakers, 'how could you do this to your people?'" In his opinion, Ebert argued -- to much applause and cheers -- "This film has the right to be about these people, and Asian American characters have the right to be whoever the hell they want to be."

In this notion that "Asian American characters have the right to be whoever the hell they want to be," Ebert defends the rights of ethnic characters, under artistic license as well as the Constitution, to follow a path determined by their actions and motivations rather than by their racial makeup. Such a claim opposes the "burden of representation," the predicament that minority filmmakers often face when audiences expect them to depict stories that explicitly promote their public identity, as was implied by the Sundance audience member who demanded of Lin, "Don't you have
a responsibility to paint a more positive and helpful portrait of your community?² It is significant that it should be Ebert, a middle-aged white man whose nationally syndicated film reviews for the Chicago Sun-Times and various television networks have shown him to be an exemplar of mainstream, middle-brow movie-going taste, who should defend ethnic artists. For such a paragon of mainstream inclinations to become the film’s unlikely champion must mean that much of America is capable of recognizing the same idea, and is indicative of a greater cultural sensitivity at large. For Asian Americans, Ebert’s criticism of the burden of representation is particularly meaningful because of their historical status as the “model minority,” a confining label that corrals Asian Americans into docile conformity under the guise of praising their industriousness and adaptability.

How did Ebert — and the mainstream American movie-going audience that he represents — come to this position? The economic and cultural transformations of globalization have been instrumental in this history. By the millennium, the global supremacy of the American movie industry was a uniquely interdependent phenomenon, wherein “Hollywood” catered to a global marketplace from which as much as half of its income resulted from foreign exports. Such an expansion in scope, however, transforms prior notions of the majority population that Hollywood targets, and hence necessarily also transforms what defines mainstream fare itself. For Asian Americans, the most systematically erased racial minority in Hollywood cinema, these changes would compel increasingly sensitive approaches towards ethnic Asian subjects, as Hollywood films after the late 1980s and early 1990s demonstrate. Ebert’s insight into the cinematic rights of representation for Asian Americans only reflects this progressive trend.

Significantly, the critical and cultural progress that Better Luck Tomorrow emblematizes overturns the notion, once common in Asian American studies, that independent cinema is the sole province of positive representation. It also suggests, because of its origins in globalization, an expanded conception of Asian America similar to the reexamination of the discipline currently ongoing in diaspora, Asian, and Asian American studies.³ Globalization confounds the very categories of “Asian” and “American,” and thus seems to require a reevaluation of the Asian American label. Cinema is a particularly visible instance of these transformations, as is apparent in the stylistic interchange of Asian and Hollywood cinema — of which the violent action at the center of Lin’s film, I will argue, is a key example. Masculinity is a more general cinematic subject in which violence figures, and because it has long been a key site of Asian racial stereotype, it often is inextricably bound up with the racial issues that globalization transforms.

These factors put pressure on the traditional disciplinary dichotomy in Asian American studies between Hollywood and independent cinema. After all, although Hollywood film is typically characterized by “universal” narratives designed to appeal to a broad audience, such an inclination towards the universal is also a defining attribute of globalization. Not surprisingly, then, post-global Hollywood representations of Asian Americans show mainstream cinema assimilating a sympathetic and non-racially-circumscribed minority perspective previously thought possible only in independent film. Indeed, this transformed sense of universality — universality as multiculturalism rather than a homogenous, de facto white majority — does not only transform the terms of Asian American identity: it also elevates Asian Americans into a prototype for today’s transnational, culturally hybrid world after globalization.

This chapter explores the recent progress of Hollywood representations of Asian Americans by comparing Better Luck Tomorrow with The Joy Luck Club, an early attempt to advance Asian American cinematic representation which the latter film, as suggested by the echoing of titles, revises. The Guru, a romantic comedy released around the same time as Better Luck Tomorrow, also figures in this history. A Hollywood film that Asian American studies overlooked, presumably because of its mainstream origins, The Guru is a paean to heterosexual virility that deserves recognition for its visionary depiction of Asian American masculinity. Admittedly, my interest in masculinity and Asian American representation in relation to The Joy Luck Club may seem familiar, but my focus on these three films — and particularly the achievements of the two postmillenial movies — is the revolution in gender and genre that globalization has wrought upon the current status of Asian American identity in Hollywood film. One way, therefore, to think of this work is as a follow-up to both Eugene Franklin Wong’s seminal On Visual Media Racism and Russell Leong’s edited collection Moving the Image.⁴ If Wong’s historical study traced the limitations of Asian representations in American film up to 1977, and Leong and his contributors heralded the accomplishments of independent cinema from 1970–90 in contesting this history, my hope is to reveal how market-driven advances in mainstream media since 1993 reverse this history, instead exhibiting a gradual synthesis of Hollywood universalism and minority perspectives that currently places mainstream cinema as the leading edge of Asian American studies and activism.
THE BURDENS OF REPRESENTATION

Any exploration of minority representation in cinema must first acknowledge the various kinds of representation that the term implies. In film history, the term refers to both the nature and content of the dramatic story (often, stereotype and convention) as well as to the industrial history that brought the film into being and subsequently distributed it in theaters. This latter aspect involves casting, other affiliated creative talent, and the kinds of audiences reached by the film’s status as either an independent or Hollywood feature. The “burden of representation,” a third aspect of cinematic representation, developed to counter adverse or restricted representation in the two other conditions but, as the name implies, can be a burden itself because of the dramatic and artistic limitations it imposes. Film scholarship and minority activism thus are most effective when they move beyond these multiple burdens of representation to demand cinematic portrayals of minority characters in which their minority status is irrelevant, as occurred in Hollywood’s historical representation of African Americans. Since African American moviegoers comprise about a third of the American movie-going audience, Hollywood efforts to appeal to this community have given rise to a whole sub-industry of current films virtually indistinguishable from Hollywood features except for the race of their African American leads.

By contrast, the apparently limited market potential of Asian Americans provides Hollywood little reason to change existing representational practices. Asian Americans compose between four and five percent of the US population and represent a proportionately minuscule fraction of the movie-going audience. The limited returns that this population represents therefore not only permit filmmakers to stereotype with impunity; it also motivates the infrequency of their appearances, preempting studios from considering Asian American topics or actors. In 1992, for example, a report from the Screen Actors Guild showed that only 1.3 per cent of all lead roles in films that year went to Asian/Pacific Islanders, considerably less than even the small fraction Asian Americans compose in the national population. Nearly a decade later, in 2000, the year of blockbuster Charlie’s Angels, co-starring Lucy Liu, this figure barely improved to 1.7 per cent—a leap for Asian Americans, but still a small step in real numbers. The Hollywood history of Asian American screen appearances thus is arguably most typical in not being present at all. As the New York Times film critic, Elvis Mitchell, recently observed, despite being “the group most often orphaned into stereotypical behavior by teenage films,” Asian Americans are so infrequent in Hollywood cinema that they were “even left out of the joke-compilation Not Another Teen Movie.”

The only significant alternative to this legacy of Hollywood invisibility has historically been independent cinema, as its centrality in Asian American studies attests. As Russell Leong, Marina Heung, Jun Xing, and Peter Feng have all demonstrated, independent cinema both offers powerful counter-images to the stereotypes in the dominant cinema and is a sanctuary for those Asian American actors and filmmakers that the mainstream industry overlooks. But a comparison of the relative audiences reached by independent and Hollywood films demonstrates the value in maintaining mainstream cinema as an object of scholarship and activism. Thousand Pieces of Gold (1991), for example, is an independent film that frequently figures in Asian American scholarship. Although the film was critically well regarded, it earned less than a million dollars through the festival and arthouse screenings to which it was limited, and it received its final national airing as a telethon broadcast on PBS. The Joy Luck Club, by contrast, was a studio production with the full weight of the Disney Corporation behind it. As the most heavily promoted film featuring an Asian American cast in Hollywood history, the movie earned a remarkable thirty million dollars. But even if it achieved unprecedented cross-over success, it still could be easily eclipsed by any genre or star-driven picture with greater mainstream appeal. Rising Sun, one of the top twenty box office hits of the same year, is an example. An action film set in Japan and portraying the secondary Japanese characters as sadistic, unscrupulous and inscrutable people deservedly thwarted by stars Sean Connery and Wesley Snipes, Rising Sun earned over sixty million dollars. With twice as many tickets sold for Rising Sun than The Joy Luck Club, we can be sure that that film’s violently xenophobic depictions of Japanese greatly undermined any achievements of The Joy Luck Club—especially among the non-Asian American audience that did not see that film.

The representational sites by which Hollywood stereotypes Asian Americans are precisely the same sites in which progressive representation can occur. These issues, which are all related, are (1) the gender dichotomy that singles out Asian American men for the brunt of Hollywood erasure; (2) the narrative conventions applied to Asian races that ensure these anti-masculine conditions are slow to change; and (3) the longstanding belief in the absolute otherness of Asian Americans that globalization would turn to advantage. I will deal with the third issue more fully in the second section of this chapter.
On the first issue, previous stereotype criticism has shown how stereotypes of Asian ethnicity frequently center upon gender. The Asian race is conventionally associated, in western perception, with thinner, shorter, and more hairless bodies than the normative white body, and with polite, modest behavior perceived to be typical of their rigidly ancient culture. Because of these connotations, heteronormative gender ideals accord Asian men and women entirely different cultural status, a fact that film reflects. Asian women, who are thought to be submissive and exotic creatures accustomed to suffering and to accommodating male pleasure, lend themselves easily to Hollywood, a film style reliant upon a profoundly heterosexual identification. They thus are an exception to the invisibility of Asian races in Hollywood cinema, as they occupy a fairly common – even co-starring – presence in Hollywood cinema. Her various appearances, as Renee Tajima catalogues, range from “the Lotus Blossom Baby (aka China Doll, Geisha Girl, Shy Polynesian beauty),” to the Dragon Lady (Mahlen’s various female relations, prostitutes, devious madames)," but all belong to a stock type, the “homogenous mass of Mama Sans.”

Ironically, however, Asian men are conceived in western perception as effeminate and sexless beings, for precisely the same reasons that Asian women are thought to be hyper-feminine and over-sexed. Their stereotypes range from the demonic evil of Fu Manchu to the shuffling Ah Sings, whose deferential nature may confirm the servility of Charlie Chan or mask the unscrupulous oriental businesswoman’s Fu Manchu-like greed. This is not to say that Asian men are always portrayed as asexual, because western anxieties about miscegenation – the underside of the orientalism that enthusiastically claims the exotic Asian woman – manifest in frequent depictions of lecherous Asian men whose sexual rejection is only ensured by their latent homosexuality or the impotent diminutiveness of his body. Obviously, this tradition does not posit Asian men as likely candidates for the active, heterosexual male protagonists privileged in Hollywood film. The historical invisibility of Asian Americans in Hollywood cinema thus is, more specifically, an invisibility of Asian men, whose rare appearances are always as secondary characters and only occur when such stereotypes are useful.

“Racial castration” is the term that David Eng, in one of the most astute explorations of cinema and Asian American masculinity, calls this symbolicemasculinization performed by Hollywood. For Eng, the term describes the visual depreciation exercised upon Asian Americans by stereotypes and erasure, but it can also apply to the way in which spectatorship further alienates Asian American men. Again, the African American model offers a useful comparison. The African American feminist critic, bell hooks, has pointed out how Hollywood can be a pleasurably transgressive experience for black men, despite its status as a mainstream medium. This occurs, as hooks notes, because the white male perspective that is the presumed audience of a Hollywood film enables a black male spectator to exult in the opportunity to identify with the autonomy of the Hollywood protagonist, a socially proscribed experience epitomized by the opportunity, in Hollywood spectatorship, to gaze upon white women. It is black women, hooks reveals, whom Hollywood neglects, by doubly excluding their race and gender in “a cinematic context that constructs our presence as absence.” It should be apparent, however, that for Asian Americans this gender split in spectatorship is reversed: Asian American women viewing Hollywood films understand their ethnicity as highly acceptable to American culture (albeit in highly stereotyped ways), whereas Asian American men are the absent presence in most Hollywood films. Already culturally and visually constructed as emasculated, impotent creatures, they are even precluded from the spectatorial transgression accorded the black male Hollywood moviegoer. This means that the male Asian American viewer of mainstream film experiences spectatorship as yet another symbol of his racial castration, in which the passive watching of a Hollywood film underscores the actual physical union that stereotypes within American culture assume Asian American men cannot achieve.

Genre segregation, the second defining problem in Asian American cinematic representation, connects with the gendered determination of visibility and stereotyping by using narrative form to reiterate masculinity’s troubled status. “Genre segregation” is the likelihood that ethnically Asian roles appear only in storylines where such a racially specific character is useful, such as in an immigration history or as a model student in a teen drama or comedy. I derive the term from the patterns in casting that Eugene Franklin Wong identifies to describe how Hollywood systematically marginalizes ethnic Asians from industrial representation. Genre segregation arguably is far more responsible for the limited opportunities for Asian American actors than the role constrictions that Wong identifies. After all, Hollywood production decisions are guided by market potential, and since genre is an aspect second only to stars in predicting a film’s commercial success, it is a deciding factor in which projects get made. Because action, comedy, and romance are the leading box office genres in the US, and genre segregation limits Asians to ethnically relevant roles, few significant opportunities arise for Asian American actors. This is particularly the case for
male actors, whose only hope for significant speaking parts may lie in the infrequent war film.

As one of the most likely opportunities for Asian American representation, the genre of history poses additional problems. Many Asian American narratives are immigrant histories and take the form of autobiography; the predominance of this theme exists because of the value of authenticity to counter past orientalist representations. Lisa Lowe and Werner Sollors, however, have both argued that the plots of generational conflict frequently at the center of such immigrant narratives inadvertently essentialize ethnic American culture. According to Lowe, "the reduction of ethnic cultural politics to struggles between first and second generations" is undesirable because they imply the impossibility of hybridity by portraying immigration history "in terms of a loss of the 'original' culture in exchange for the new 'American' culture." Similarly, the always combative Frank Chin has claimed that autobiography is a Christian tradition, and consequently condemns the use of that form as tantamount to ethnic renunciation. Chin's admittedly controversial claims aside, autobiography and immigrant histories certainly limit artistic achievement. These genres underscore the "burden" in the burden of representation by upholding narrative conventions, and by thus engaging in genre segregation they fail to demonstrate artistic originality. One would think that Asian Americans, used to being thought of as an indistinguishable and unimaginative mass, and already feeling the strain of confinement in the model minority label, ought to be eager to shatter such sources of stereotype.

The Joy Luck Club illustrates the various problems in Hollywood representations of Asian Americans as previously outlined. The film, based on Amy Tan's bestselling novel of the same name, was produced by prestigious Oscar-winning director Oliver Stone, whose service in the Vietnam War sparked a lasting personal interest in Asia. Both Stone and screenwriter Ronald Bass were determined to maintain the sensitivities they perceived in the original novel. Bass, for example, agreed to adapt the work on the condition that all of Tan's original stories be retained in the film, and Stone's commitment to authenticity and sensitivity was evident in his appointment of Wayne Wang, the director of the critically acclaimed independent film, Chan is Missing (1982), to direct. But if Wang's appointment to the project was indicative of an emerging willingness in Hollywood to disseminate sensitive and authentic images of Asian Americans, the film did not achieve its promise. Not only was it eclipsed by more commercial vehicles such as the Connery-Snipes actioner, but it failed to transcend the Hollywood conventions of gender privileging and genre segregation that have long conspired to limit Asian American cinematic representation. Both the immigrant genre and the invisibility of masculinity distinguish The Joy Luck Club movie, though as many contemporary reviews of the film pointed out, the mothers' stories in China were more interesting, which suggests how little Hollywood is capable of portraying a compellingly American vision of Asian identity.

Significantly, then, gender and genre conspire in The Joy Luck Club to extend inclusion into American society only at the price of the women's willing erasure of their own ethnicity. In the three romantic relationships with which the film concludes, two women have white husbands and the Asian boyfriend of the third woman, unlike the other consorts, gets no close-up. In her study of this recurring scenario in Hollywood film, Gina Marchetti shows how these cinematic instances of Asian woman/white man romances naturalize western or white racial supremacy. The implication is clear: because the women resist their racial heritage, as embodied in their rejected Asian suitors, the film suggests that hybrid identity ultimately is not possible. As Jessica Hagedorn notes of the film, the daughters "had lost all sense of self." The film's resistance to the continuity of a wholly ethnically Asian family is apparent in one scene in which the camera lingers lovingly over the mixed-race child of one of the interracial couples, whose honey-colored hair and skin are offered as the optimistic embodiment of the (racially) brightened future of Asian Americans.

Both the promise and failure of The Joy Luck Club illuminate the value of placing mainstream or Hollywood cinema as the focus of Asian American activism. The previous notion of independent cinema as the privileged site of progressive Asian American representation exists because of independent cinema's strong associations with art and politics, as in the socially critical, guerilla filmmaking of Chan is Missing and Who Killed Vincent Chin? Asian American cinema studies reflect this commitment through its own predominately political critical approaches, which diverge from the more philosophical and psychoanalytic approaches common in film theory in general. But if Hollywood art inflicts injuries upon a population that are countered by the politically oppositional art of independent film, the very power of that dominant art demonstrates its value — and capacity — to be redirected for similarly progressive political purposes. Yoshio Kichi, a prominent Hollywood film editor (he was associate editor on Raging Bull) as well as a veteran Asian American activist, is a compelling proponent of this view. According to Kichi, talent that exclusively concentrates on alternative media, "loses out
on the training and experiences needed to compete beyond the ethnic
encave, and ultimately may lose an opportunity to change the stereotypes
and invisibility that prevail within Hollywood. Starting in the late 1990s,
globalization would provide the enabling conditions for such a change. It
would do so because of the way in which it reframed the criteria — and
particularly the stakes — of the perceived foreignness that previously shaped
Asian American cinematic representation.

GLOBALIZATION AND THE RISE OF ASIAN COOL

The Hollywood portrayal of people of Asian ethnicity as foreign and non-
American — the third defining aspect of Hollywood representations of Asian
Americans — has always reflected the political and especially the economic
relationship of the US to the Asian nation to which the characters supposed-
dally belong. As Robert G. Lee and Eugene Franklin Wong have shown,
Hollywood portraits of ethnic Asians run the gamut of romantic novelty,
sinister labor threat, Communist agent and war victim, reflecting the various
ways in which immigration laws and US military involvement have figured
Asian people relative to default white America. As a mode of racial repre-
sentation that always implies their fundamental foreignness, this emphasis
upon ethnic Asians in relation to another space — unlike the stereotyping
levied at African Americans — is particularly apparent in the ethnic spec-
ficity by which such characters are presented on film. It is a significant
fact that despite the common western notion that members of the Asian race all
look alike, Hollywood portraits of Asians have been so closely indexed to
contemporary politics that their dramatizations often presuppose the ability
to understand, for example, the relevance of Chinese vs. Japanese citizen-
ship in a film from 1941–5. Similarly, more recently Hollywood has noted
South Asian immigration to the US by scripting Indian and Pakistani
taxi drivers and convenience store clerks. These characters, which
replaced African Americans as the new race for these stock working-class
figures, are nearly always minor roles whose limited dialogue usually exists
to make cheap comic shots at their language and culture.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, such a tendency to portray Asian ethnicity
as nationality was spurred by the growing economic agency of ethnic Asians,
both in the US and abroad. As the 1980s witnessed the rapid enrichment of
Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan, this event was par-
alleled, in film as in the national imagination, by the domestic rise of the
Asian American model minority — as was trumpeted on a cover issue of a
campus edition of Newsweek magazine in 1984. In Hollywood, contempo-
rary representations of Asians maintained such national othering by hiring
Asian American actors for highly stereotyped roles as foreigners. The career
of respected Japanese American actor Gedde Watanabe illustrates this ten-
dency. In 1986, Watanabe had second billing in the Paramount comedy,
Gung Ho. In the film, about the culture clash when a Japanese firm buys an
American automobile factory, Watanabe and others were humorless and
tyrannical technocrats, the straight men to the irrepressibly free-spirited
American union laborers, who are supposed to be lovable despite their
antagonism towards the company that bails out their dying industrial town.
More embarrassingly, two years earlier in the John Hughes adolescent
romance, Sixteen Candles (1984), Watanabe provided comic relief as “Long
Duk Dong,” a Chinese exchange student lodging with an American family.
In addition to using race as the sign of the social outcast (in which the
hunched posture and thick glasses of the Asian American super-student
marks his place in high school’s dreaded “out” crowd), the name of
Watanabe’s character was the character’s main joke. Decades of stereotypes
of Asian emasculation, which manifest in popular beliefs that “Asian men
have small penises,” were supposed to make the very idea of a “Long Duk
Dong” hilariously funny. The film recap’s the improbable humor of the char-
acter’s sexuality in a scene in which the diminutive character slumps in bliss
over the matronly bosom of a much taller white woman. The impact of this
film is immeasurable. Ask any American teenager who came of age watch-
ing John Hughes movies; everyone remembers the name of Long Duk Dong.

Possible solutions to the problem of Hollywood depiction of Asian
American masculinity have been discussed since Frank Chin’s 1972 essay,
“Confessions of the Chinatown Cowboy,” in which he describes how
“movies were teachers” that “[i]n no uncertain terms . . . taught Americans
that we were . . . a race of sissies.” For Chin, this “wrong movie” about
Asian Americans needs to be corrected by the “right movie,” a “good
movie” that, for Chin at least, was not fulfilled by Hollywood but rather by
“the Chinese movies I grew up with” — that is, Asian martial arts dramas
which provided the same “ballsy individuality” as Hollywood westerns. Signifi-
cantly, however, Chin’s solution to restoring masculinity to Asian
Americans remains firmly grounded in mainstream film discourse, as his
turn to genres of Chinese martial arts and his own self-reference (as a
“Chinatown Cowboy”) blend Asian ethnic heritage with Hollywood iconol-
yogy. Similarly, in his essay for The Big Aiiiiieeeel!, the landmark anthology
of Asian American literature, Chin rejects autobiography by specifically advocating a “fighting” consciousness modeled on martial arts or other indigenous traditions accessible in popular Asian cinema. Therefore, significantly, this cinematic version of racial empowerment turns not to independent film but rather to an alternative that seeks the power of mainstream genres but with a racially familiar image.

To be sure, the chauvinistic rhetoric in Chin’s cinematic ideal of “ballsiness” has problems. Most disturbing, as King-Kok Cheung has importantly pointed out, is the way in which Chin’s alternative to the orientalist commodification he associates with Kingston and Tan runs the risk of being anti-woman, urging Asian Americans to empower race at the cost of gender. This dichotomy exists, however, because of the strong association of gender with genre implicit in cinema, and it is under this generic concern that Chin’s manifesto for aggressive masculinity is relevant. Asian Americans don’t need another *Joy Luck*, but rather a Hollywood movie that features – for once – a powerful Asian American male. Such a hero would have to go beyond Bruce Lee, the most iconic Asian American film star to date, by insisting upon romantic qualities that Lee’s films did not contain. In fact, although *Joy Luck* garnered most of the attention, arguably the more important movie of 1993 to consider Asian American issues was *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story*, a biopic whose straightforward homage to the movie icon also included a number of critically progressive elements. These included emphasizing Lee’s sexual appeal, beginning with his early years as a dance champion in Hong Kong, through this interracial marriage – and thereby also sympathetically depicting the injuries of prejudice and stereotype. The film is especially acute on the issues of cinematic representation itself, portraying the limited opportunities Lee found in Hollywood and also incorporating stereotype criticism in a remarkably sensitive scene in which he walks out of a screening of the beloved Hollywood movie, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, because of that film’s notorious caricature of a Japanese man.

The reception of recent major Hollywood productions reveals a maturing sensitivity to matters of Asian American representation that *Dragon* inaugurated. In 1999, *The Phantom Menace*, the long-awaited follow-up to the *Star Wars* trilogy, appeared. Among the new characters created for this installment were Jar Jar Binks, a lanky, awkward, and rather dumb sidekick with dreadlocks and a large posterior, and who spoke a slurrid Caribbean pidgin exactly like that of black slaves in old Hollywood movies, and the opportunistic Nemoidians, a hive-dwelling, hoarding tribe “known for their exceptional organizing abilities” as a visual dictionary marketed with the film explained. In the film the Nemoidians speak in a lisp that blurs the /l/ and /r/ sounds in the same way that film actors employ a Chinese accent as an all-purpose Asian voice. As numerous film critics, fans, and journalists quickly recognized, both characters reprised cornerstone cinematic stereotypes. Jar Jar was described as a cross between Sambo, Stepin Fetchit, and Butterfly McQueen, and the Nemoidians were “stock Asian villains out of black-and-white B movies of the 1930s and 1940s, complete with . . . a space-age version of . . . Fu Manchu clothing.” Indeed, the most recent referents for the unscrupulous, inscrutable Oriental businessman the Nemoidians evoked were the characters in *Gung Ho* and *Rising Sun*. Two things are remarkable about this widespread critical distaste. First, the outcry over *The Phantom Menace* suggested growing cultural sensitivity in the mainstream population, in which Hollywood stereotypes of Asian Americans were no longer tolerated. This was true regardless of the appeal of the film, as there can hardly be a movie more endorsed of enthusiasm than an episode in the *Star Wars* franchise. Second, the recognition of the stereotyping that simultaneously applied to the Nemoidians and Jar Jar Binks suggests a new capacity to see both the Asian American and the African American perspectives with the same multicultural empathy. Such an insight moves away from the longstanding tendency to perceive Asian ethnicity as foreign that persisted as late as six years earlier, in the year of *Rising Sun* and *The Joy Luck Club*.

What brought about such radical change? Arif Dirlik summarizes the role of globalization: “the emergence of Pacific Asian economies as key players in the global economy has had a transformative effect on the Asian American self-image, as well as on the perceptions of Asian Americans in the society at large.” In the early years of globalization the growing economic might of Asia was threatening, but as it accelerated both the increasing imbrication of multinational corporations and the implosion of the Asian economies in the later 1990s rendered these paranoid portraits of Asian business anachronistic. Hollywood’s ascendency from a national industry to dominate most foreign markets is part of this change, in which the domestic outcry against *The Phantom Menace* foreshadows how globalization brought upon Hollywood a greater responsibility for fashioning non-offensive, easily exportable material. In other words, the “American” hegemony of global Hollywood actually created a global village whose multicultural landscape had the benefit of improving multicultural conditions back in the US. As Dirlik notes, “Asian America is no longer just a location in the United States, but
is at the same time on a metaphorical rim" whose horizon expanded with the economic and cultural effects of globalization.29 This redirection in Hollywood regarding Asian representation is consistent with contemporary shifts in the Asian American population, of which currently two-thirds were born in Asia, and who maintain strong trans-Pacific ties enabled by jet travel and telecommunications. Importantly, this history, a push-pull model of cultural change, influenced film production in Hollywood through the Asian nationals upon whom the industry now relies rather than the Asian Americans, who, as previously noted, constitute too small a market to effect change themselves.

*Pearl Harbor,* the big “event” movie of the summer of 2001, exemplifies the progressive dividends of these new commercial responsibilities. The subject matter of the film—that is, the Japanese air attack on American soil that took over two thousand American lives and provoked the internment of tens of thousands of American citizens of Japanese descent—is one of the most divisive moments of Asian American history, and certainly was the source of the most deleterious cinematic images of ethnic Asians. Given this history, activism to protest the film began with news of its development and consolidated until its release.30 Significantly, though, those efforts were anticipated by Disney, the studio behind the film, which already had consulted with leaders of Japanese and Japanese American groups from the very beginning of development. The changes made in the script thus stemmed, importantly, not so much from Asian American activism as from internal recognition of the extranational conditions of globalization—that is, the lucrative Japanese market that can alone generate twenty-five to thirty per cent of the foreign box office on a Hollywood blockbuster. *Pearl Harbor* displays this newfound sensitivity by omitting the term, “dirty Jap,” by portraying the Japanese public against provoking the US, and by generally shifting the emphasis away from the attack and towards the courage demonstrated by both forces.31 In a crucial sequence in the film, for example, which depicts the Japanese preparations for the attack, a minute and a half of hagiographic slow-motion close-ups of handsome Asian men are accompanied by a barely accented voice-over, from a pilot to his father, that re-present the formerly vilified kamikaze as an elite warrior whose actions partake in a ritual of national honor and filial piety. These images and narration sharply counter the notion of a “ruthless” personality and “squat Mongolid” features that once were thought to distinguish the Japanese, as described in a notorious *Life* magazine feature that appeared shortly after the Pearl Harbor bombing.32

However cynical and mercenary, then, the motivations underlying the millennial re-telling of Pearl Harbor nevertheless contribute to advances in the Hollywood representations of ethnic Asians. Indeed, the cultural change that *Pearl Harbor* suggests calls into question the relevancy of the “Asian American” category at all, as the narrative changes that recuperated the Pearl Harbor history for Asian Americans originated out of concerns for the film’s reception among Asian nationals. A more accurate way to think of the current Asian American mediascape thus would be to acknowledge the newly positive influence that Asian nations have upon Asian Americans, in which the longstanding tendency of Hollywood to portray ethnic Asians as foreign now earns its sanguine reinvention as a business practice that improves representational conditions for Asian Americans precisely because of its obligation to lump all Asian ethnicities and nationalities into one mass. Such a global mediascape, moreover, also transforms Hollywood by assimilating foreign cinemas that previously were only present in America among Asian immigrants and first-generation Asian American viewers, like the Chinese martial arts movies that Frank Chin enjoys. In his influential study of diasporic cinema, Hamid Naficy calls this syncretic propensity “refusion,” a blend of ethnic and mainstream elements that is “not a refusal of dominant traditions but an assimilation of that with more esoteric features.”33 Although independent cinema is usually the source of refusion, as Naficy notes, the momentum of globalization is sufficient to move alternative aspects into the mainstream. Significantly, when this occurs Asian Americans are constituted not so much as a minority group but rather as a prototype for globalization, whose postcolonial hybridity is evoked on film by a postmodern refusion of both Hollywood and non-Hollywood styles.

The Indian and Hong Kong film industries were key sources in this stylistic transformation of Hollywood. Both nations foster vibrant film industries whose product and audience offered Hollywood stylistic inspiration and an enthusiastic movie-going audience worth targeting. India, which leads the world in annual film production, is inextricable from the spectacularly excessive musical romances that are its favorite genre. The camp appeal of its musicals was the site of some coveted roles in 2001, when award-winning director Baz Luhrmann recycled American pop hits for his Hollywood homage, *Moulin Rouge!* The following year, the expanded scope of Asian America was further demonstrated when *Bend It Like Beckham,* a rousing comedy about a tomboy daughter of Sikh immigrants in England, became the highest-grossing film by a non-white director in British history.
Although the film, by Gurindher Chadha, is not American, Hollywood’s stakes in pursuing the hybrid blend of east and west associated with Asian Americans were evident when American studios battled over the rights to Chadha’s next film.

In Hong Kong, which at its height had the world’s highest rate of per capita film consumption, influenced Hollywood conventions of Asian Americans because of its generic focus on action films, the single most lucrative genre for Hollywood, in both domestic and global markets. Hong Kong movies are known for dynamic action that makes the languorous iconography of American action stars pale in comparison. Its specific attributes are kinetic speed, often heightened with aggressively fast editing techniques, but based primarily upon the acrobatics, stunts, gunplay, and other physical accomplishments that exhibit a specifically Asian martial arts heritage. The best known of the directors, John Woo, is known for the gun battles in which a favorite star, Chow Yun-fat, fights holding guns in both hands. As the latest incarnation of the “ballys” Chinese movies that Frank Chin espoused, these films transformed the context in which the Asian male body was seen, particularly for the American studio executives and moviegoers who discovered them. In the later 1990s, Hong Kong-style action films emerged as a major studio trend. The blockbusters, _The Matrix_ (1999) and _Charlie’s Angels_ (2000), both imported master Hong Kong action choreographers for their fight sequences, and as further evidence of the revolution in connotation that Asian cinema signified to Hollywood audiences, the fact of action choreography by a Hong Kong martial artist was often mentioned in movie trailers and theater taglines. Indeed, American enthusiasm for Hong Kong-style martial arts movies was so great that it even propelled the Chinese-language film, _Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon_, by Taiwanese American director Ang Lee, to blockbuster status, becoming the highest-grossing foreign-language film in US history. Interestingly, both _The Matrix_ and _Charlie’s Angels_ seem to tangentially acknowledge these debts to Asian cinema, as the key role of Morpheus in _The Matrix_ was initially offered to Chow Yun-fat, and _Charlie’s Angels_, a remake of a classic American television series, exchanged one of the three white leads in the original show for the Asian American actress Lucy Liu.

In pop culture terms, globalization made the Asian American body cool. By “cool,” I am deliberately differentiating these millennial trends from the “Asian chic” that were heralded in a 1993 _Time_ magazine feature which celebrated the unprecedented visibility of Asians and Asian Americans in _Joy Luck, Dragon_, and Ang Lee’s _The Wedding Banquet_, a Chinese-language comedy set in New York, which had the highest-percentage gross on cost of all American films that year. Because “chic” implies a fashion, however, it implicitly trivializes its object’s impact and intimates its exhaustion. As such, the epithet never indicated unqualified cultural inclusion. The term “cool,” by contrast, connotes something prior, and therefore enduring, as well as an ineffability that resists trivialization and reduction to mere consumerism. Coolness is central to cinematic iconography and, as Hollywood movie idols show, it is also, originally, a distinctly American phenomenon. Coolness therefore is a far better index of assimilation than the orientalizing othering of chic, and it required a phenomenon on the scale of globalization to usher the conversion of chic into cool. It was coolness that underlay Bruce Lee’s appeal in the US in the 1970s; it also describes part-Asian Keanu Reeves’ memorable turn as the hero of _The Matrix_. As these male examples of cinematic cool suggest, the gendered connotations of coolness have been instrumental in rehabilitating Asian American masculinity. Because the operative adjective for the sexual appeal of female film stars is not cool but “hot,” it must be a male star, rather than oriental pinup fantasy Lucy Liu, whose ability to project cool will be the most valuable component in the representational progress of Asian Americans.

The romantic comedy, _The Guru_, illustrates this transformed status of Asian American men in current Hollywood film. The 2002 film, from Universal Pictures – a studio whose name aptly echoes contemporary global trends – participates in the fashion for Bollywood-style cinema by featuring a South Asian male lead. As such, the film is historically significant as the first mainstream feature to depict an ethnic Asian male as a romantic interest for white women – to depict him, that is, as the lead in a comedy, unlike the ways in which Asian men had been rejected or punished in past Hollywood pictures. The achievements of this unprecedented casting are significant: in keeping with the general romantic invisibility of Asian men, South Asians had been erased from Hollywood romances as late as 1996, when the Oscar-winning film, _The English Patient_, drastically minimized the romance between a Sikh soldier and a white nurse that constitutes much of the novel upon which the movie is based.

The numerous revisions of Asian American cinematic representation that _The Guru_ exerts begin with the start of the film. The film starts as a familiar immigrant narrative, with an opening sequence in Delhi, and soon shifts to New York, where the protagonist Ramu works in a restaurant and survives in a slum. Ramu’s ambition, however, is to make it as an actor, and it is in this
slight twist in genre – where immigrant story morphs into show-business fable – that The Guru begins its radical departure from previous Hollywood representations of Asian Americans. Cinematic visibility, The Guru smartly acknowledges, is the true test of inclusion into American culture. Romance intersects with this plot line as Ramu answers a casting call for an “ethnic male” and wins a film role opposite Sharonna (Heather Graham), the comedy co-star with whom he’ll soon fall in love. Because Sharonna is white, the romantic plotline metonymizes the issues of acceptance that The Guru portrays. The joke is that Ramu’s role is in a porn shoot. Of course, such a plot device, where race is shadowed by graphic professional intimacy, is nothing new, but it is for the specific racial scenario that The Guru proposes. Previous Hollywood stereotypes about Asian masculinity would have rendered such a casting unthinkable (indeed, given the previous stereotypes about black men, “the ethnic male” the casting ad presumably called for probably intended an African American). That The Guru presupposes the desirability of an Asian man to the extent of dramatizing it on two levels only underscores its achievement. The movie posits Ramu as a romantic interest while the film-within-the-film insists upon his erotic appeal.

The Guru bolsters this progressive version of Asian American masculinity by both countering prohibitions against interracial romance as well as criticizing the reduction of Asian culture to orientalist consumption. The film achieves these ends by showing Ramu’s sexual appeal to be widespread and acceptable, and by distinguishing this romantic enthusiasm from the fetishization of Asianness that the film gently satirizes in a subplot about Ramu’s success as an Indian mystic. These developments begin at a party for dilettante spiritualist Lexi (Marisa Tomei), where Ramu charms everyone as a “sex guru” who dispenses mantras about emotional well-being by way of sexual fulfillment. While these scenes of Ramu’s evident charm set up his appeal to Sharonna, they also satirize those Americans who buy into Asian chic, much as Vijay Prashad argues that Deepak Chopra profits from Western consumers. To underscore the appeal of Asian American masculinity, Ramu and Lexi have sex the very first night that they meet, an audacious transgression of conventions of Asian emasculation which the film further naturalizes by having Lexi make the first overture. Similarly, the “morning after” scene shows a relaxed and glowing Lexi on the telephone already enthusing about Ramu’s prowess, while her manicurist and acupuncturist are unsurprised when her lover emerges from the bedroom, in a classic film convention for post-coital relations, wrapped only in a towel.

It is important to emphasize that The Guru’s interracial romance does not replicate the problems of white male/Asian female relations previously described. This is because the default white perspective in Hollywood that privileges Asian women by erasing Asian men requires the idealized depiction of white female/Asian male miscegenation in order to advocate the idea of Asian masculinity to Asians as well as to the non-Asian mainstream. In this situation, white women viewing the film perceive the scenario as unproblematic, and Asian American women, who are accustomed to viewing Hollywood films from the same default white perspective, ironically are encouraged to curtail those white man/Asian woman romances precisely because they see their own race appreciated on these terms. To emphasize the appeal of ethnic difference, The Guru does not compromise upon its star’s Asianness. Jimi Mistry, who plays Ramu, looks South Asian, rather than displaying the whitewashed features usually required of ethnic actors to break into mass entertainment (as in the brothers, Russell and Michael Wong, who are mixed). Mistry is very thin, lacking the chiseled hardbody usually required for a Hollywood leading man, and his smaller frame is further contrasted to that of the burly actor (Dashi Mihok, The Perfect Storm, The Thin Red Line) who is cast as Sharonna’s quintessentially American boyfriend. Yet Ramu’s frail physique is never elided; indeed, the porn plot of the film usefully requires it to be frequently displayed. The Guru pursues this point even to granting Mistry a “butt shot,” a recent screen requisite for many leading men. Similarly, it is Ramu’s competitor whose masculinity is problematized by a homosexual denouement.

Porn functions in The Guru as a facetious metaphor for the eroticization of ethnic bodies that the film itself performs. If Ramu’s porn gig is awarded because of the director’s enthusiasm for his “interesting look – kind of [an] oriental, cabana boy thing,” the real film, The Guru, makes numerous references to other Hollywood films to specifically present Ramu as the global heir of prior Hollywood icons. The casting of Heather Graham, for example, plays upon her previous role as a porn star in Boogie Nights (1997), in order to lightheartedly suggest Ramu’s interchangeability with her previous co-star, former Calvin Klein model, Mark Wahlberg. Other intertextual references include John Travolta in Grease, Tom Cruise’s career-launching, underwear-clad lip-sync scene from Risky Business, and the climactic, church-crashing finale of The Graduate – a particularly effective reference because of that film’s history in making a megastar out of another physically diminutive actor. And, if I may be excused for the pun, the film’s biggest achievement in revising Asian American male stereotypes occurs by way of
its use of the porn setting to foreground Ramu’s sexual organ, which is scrutinized during Ramu’s audition. That Ramu gets the part would suggest that it isn’t an issue. The scene thus overturns the “small dick” stereotype that has long plagued Asian men, making The Guru the retort, long overdue, to Long Duk Dong. If there is any film character that Ramu references, it is “Dirk Digger,” Mark Wahlberg’s role in Boogie Nights – another character whose name was a phallic joke, but one renowned for the length, rather than the inadequacy, of his penis.

Of course, it would go too far to praise The Guru as the Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner? for Asian Americans. The film, “from the makers of Notting Hill and Bridget Jones’ Diary,” as the print ads announced it, is a studio genre piece whose superficial engagements with Bollywood stylistics barely mask the predictable dialogue, tired scenario, and superficial characters that are hardly distinguishable from a conventional romantic comedy. That’s the point: by progressively featuring an ethnic gender group usually visible only in independent film, the mainstream movie is already revolutionary. It is not surprising that reviews of the film in the general press were the first to recognize The Guru’s historical achievements. Because general interest reviewers were most aware of the mainstream film’s variations on Hollywood and Bollywood formulas, their discussions recognized the film’s risk in an opening without any recognizable stars and praised Mistry’s performance amidst the genre’s stock roles as the “least stereotyped” of the film’s characters.\(^{36}\)

**MAINSTREAM CINEMA AND ASIAN AMERICAN ACTIVISM**

It is useful at this point to review the changes towards a progressive depiction of Asian Americans in mainstream cinema that preceded Better Luck Tomorrow. Because Asian American studies, like most ethnic scholarship, began with political activism, the discipline privileges the political commitments of independent cinema over Hollywood’s historical promulgation of Asian American stereotypes. But such an exclusive focus on independent cinema overlooks the new possibilities that globalization brought to the mainstream, as Sandra Liu has recently argued. Citing how industrial and economic changes of the 1980s and 1990s eroded the divisions between “good” independent cinema and “bad” mainstream film, Liu contends that the market-oriented nature of the US film industry suggests that “film activ-

\(^{36}\) This idea that Hollywood cinema can change based on audience and executive pressures from above is echoed by Rey Chow, whose thoughtful discussion of The Joy Luck Club underscores the importance of generic revolution. Reiterating how the “political imperative of vindicating the neglected fate/history of an entire culture and people” that characterizes the ethnic film only entrenches the ethnic, Chow’s criticism of the burden of representation reveals how cultural inclusion will be achieved only when Asian Americans are portrayed as the site of universal human narratives rather than specifically ethnic issues.\(^{38}\)

Significantly, Wayne Wang, the director of Joy Luck, outlined these issues in terms that exactly anticipate the rhetoric of Ebert’s later defense of Better Luck Tomorrow. Complaining that studios considering him for a directing job “always would ask me what made me think I could direct a movie about [non-Asian American material, such as] teenagers in Minnesota,” Wang recounts, “I’d say to them, ‘Would you ask Ridley Scott or Tony Scott that same question?’” Like Ebert’s comment, Wang’s comment reveals the racial prejudice that presumes an ethnic filmmaker cannot produce films for the general audience. Moreover, by contrasting himself with directors Ridley Scott and Tony Scott – who are British – Wang’s comment also reveals the misconceptions in that logic. The false emphasis on race over culture, Wang points out, ignores the fact that as a naturalized American citizen who arrived in the US in 1967, he is more “American” than the other directors, as he has “been here much longer than they have.”\(^{39}\) Again, the history of African American representation in Hollywood provides a useful model for the freedom from the burden of representation that confronts Asian Americans in Hollywood. The gradual diffusion of independent sensitivity in Hollywood that Asian Americans require occurred for African Americans in two phases: Hollywood developed the highly stereotyped genre of blaxploitation in an effort to capitalize on the African American audience; these images, however, were criticized, and ultimately were further corrected by a de-romanticizing strain of gritty ghetto realism as well as by the emergence of bourgeois genre pictures that put black actors in roles usually reserved for whites. For Asian Americans, globalization induced an expansion in Hollywood’s ethnic Asian audience comparable to the historical significance of African American audiences within the domestic market – hence films after that time, like The Guru, are the Asian American equivalent of Waiting to Exhale, progressively depicting ethnic characters in traditional mainstream genres.
Similarly, *Better Luck Tomorrow* can be considered the Asian American *Boyz in the Hood* or *Menace II Society*, countering stereotype by specifically portraying them in the genre of violent crime. The particular intelligence of *Better Luck Tomorrow* in rewriting Asian American stereotypes was its use of the more recent associations with Asian bodies after the Hong Kong action pictures that helped undo earlier connotations – an inspired intervention that would reposition Hollywood as the progressive frontier of Asian American studies and activism.

From its inception, *Better Luck Tomorrow* was conceived to combat genre segregation and the other strictures limiting Asian American representation in Hollywood. Justin Lin, the director and co-screenwriter, is a Chinese American born in Taiwan but raised in the US. Only thirty years old when he completed *Better Luck Tomorrow*, Lin had been a teenager at the time of *Sixteen Candles* and a college student during the open casting calls for *The Joy Luck Club*, and hence came of age during the era of change in media representation of Asian Americans. Yet even during film school at UCLA, Lin felt confined by the genre ghetto and the burden of representation that applies to most minority filmmakers. “When I was a film student,” he has recounted, “I could only make personal movies. When you’re Asian American, everyone would say, how can you ever make a Hollywood film?”

Clearly, the implication in such comments was the familiar industrial conception that racial minority status necessarily precludes the capacity for universal storytelling that Hollywood requires. In rejection of this predilection, and in an effort to create work for fellow Asian American talents without repeating such tired themes, Lin began a fictionalized account of a high school murder that had taken place in Southern California in 1993, not far from where Lin grew up. This history, which the contemporary press dubbed the “Honor Roll Killing,” had involved both white and Asian American honor students who had murdered their classmate, Stuart Tay. In their script Lin and co-author Ernesto Oronda emphasized the apparent paradox in the press rubric by depicting how the pressure-cooker environment of academically driven students can easily slide into fraud, drugs, and other criminal acts. In his casting, however, Lin chose only Asian American actors. The film thus resembled *The Joy Luck Club* in that it featured usually underemployed actors. Unlike the earlier film, though, *Better Luck Tomorrow* exhibits the changed cinematic status of Asian Americans after globalization. While the audition tape of Jason Tobin, one of the leads, consisted entirely of walk-ons as food delivery boys, one of the other leads, Sung Kang, had been one of the handsome faces recently depicted in *Pearl Harbor*.

Lin’s revisions of Hollywood conventions regarding Asian American representation were multiple. First, by rewriting the circumstances of the actual history upon which the movie was based, so that the film’s ensemble cast was entirely Asian American, Lin offered unprecedented opportunity for minority actors to assume a role that for historical accuracy, at least, should have been partially allocated towards white performers. Lin maintained this commitment even as he sought sponsors, choosing to continue shopping the script around rather than change some of the leads to Latin or African American characters, as some producers suggested. (Interestingly, it was former rap star, MC Hammer, who Lin reports is “very sympathetic to the issues of minority artists,” who provided the funds to set the film into production. Such recognition of Lin’s predicament by an African American artist testifies to the new recognition of Asian Americans as a companion American minority). Second, by offering an ensemble cast of men rather than women, *Better Luck Tomorrow* made visible the gender that bears the brunt of Hollywood erasure of Asians. This change in gender was motivated by genre, which wrought additional benefits. Thus, third, by yoking a crime story to its ethnic cast Lin dealt death blows to both the old Asian American stereotype of the immigrant model minority as well as the more recent association with violent action pictures. These Asian Americans, the film shows, are both honor students and a “Chinese mafia,” as they are described at one point in the film. The sum of the film’s various revisions of Asian American representation is a film with the same agenda of *The Joy Luck Club* but with an entirely different aesthetic strategy. As many of the contemporary reviewers of the film were quick to note, “‘Better Luck’ is the antithesis of *Joy Luck.*”

The title of *Better Luck Tomorrow* deftly summarizes Lin’s simultaneous revisions of old and new Asian American stereotypes. The name echoes both *The Joy Luck Club* and *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), a John Woo film starring Chow Yun-fat that had been one of the most famous of the Hong Kong movies that impacted Hollywood in the 1990s. By merging both titles into his own Lin acknowledges the blending of both heritages while also insisting, by that corruption, upon its status as a new thing altogether. According to Lin, the title began as his film school thesis project, when the director felt acutely marginalized because of his ethnicity. That original project “was a spoof on a Hong Kong action film, but with the sensibility of *Joy Luck*,” devised because those seemed the two possibilities that Hollywood allot Asian talent. His explanation of why the title appealed to him aptly positions his film as a corrective to both the older and more recent genres: “it [the title] had to say what we had to explore, as Asian Americans”
The identity "between" the various Asian American stereotypes that Lin describes is, paradoxically, the idea that the visible ethnicity of these characters is not narratively significant at all. This is the single most significant of the film's several historical achievements. Importantly, nowhere in the film's dialogue does any character make reference to any ethnic or cultural pressure as motivation for their actions. The female love interest, for example, who is Asian and is academically driven, is the adopted child of a white family, thereby complicating any possible cultural stereotypes (to underscore this point, Lin has her brush aside doubts by insisting that her adopted parents "are my real family"). Similarly, secondary characters — such as the other members of the school academic quiz bowl team, on which the main characters serve — are of a variety of different races. This is not to say that race and stereotype don't come up: racial slurs, surface, a character perceives his token status on the school athletic team, and a prostitute hired by the boys asks "what are you guys, a math club?" But race, as Roger Ebert later explained in his published review, works in the film "[i]ke African American films that take race for granted and get on with the characters and the story." This film is, as Ebert furthermore noted, about a "generation [that] no longer obsesses with the nation before the hyphen."43

This idea that Better Luck Tomorrow should be accepted as a story in which race is incidental to the plot is affirmed through the film's treatment of generational identity, that particular trope of Asian American immigrant narratives that has been so hampering for acculturation. In Better Luck Tomorrow, significantly, generational conflict is absent, lost in a vacuum that is a biting indictment of the need for social guidance in general. Almost no adults are shown in the film, and although at least one of the characters, Daric Loo (Roger Fan), is said to "live alone in a house while his parents send him money from Vancouver," like so many American children of affluent Asian parents who live abroad, the implication is that of youth gone amok because of the absence of adult guidance. As many critics noted, the film was not so much an ethnic film as the latest in a long line of Hollywood films about the dissipation of American youth, including The Asphalt Jungle, The Graduate, Risky Business, Fast Times at Ridgemont High, and Dazed and Confused.

The melding of independent and Hollywood media in Better Luck Tomorrow is another way to think of the film's revisions that is definitive of the film's historical status. Lin made the film on digital video, completing it on a $250,000 budget; it was only the director's second feature-length film. But slickly shot and heavily overlaid with a pop/rock soundtrack, Better

**Luck Tomorrow** was readily positioned for pickup by a Hollywood distributor. The sharp style and storytelling got the film into the important Sundance Film Festival, an annual exhibition of independent films which has increasingly become the province of Hollywood studios trolling for cheap sleeper hits. At Sundance in 2002, response to the film was so positive and so swift that Lin has said that he and his fellow producers were mobbed by willing buyers within thirty minutes of the opening credits. The distributor that Lin eventually selected to market the film epitomizes the mainstream: MTV Films, an offshoot of the powerful music video network and partner of Paramount, whose primary audience of eighteen to thirty-four-year-old males is the largest demographic for Hollywood as well. The enthusiasm of MTV Films for *Better Luck Tomorrow* demonstrates the acceptance the film enjoyed as an exemplar of mainstream, rather than specifically Asian American, subjects. As one MTV representative recounted their reasons for acquiring the film, "We thought our audience," which is "a very diverse group," "would be very interested in this film."44

Better Luck Tomorrow's revolutionary effect on the status of cinema in Asian American studies consolidated as the film became the center of debate over whether it was an independent or mainstream picture. This controversy, which resulted in massive activism, demonstrates the important position Hollywood now occupies in returning Asian American scholarship to the political activism with which the discipline began. As the movie's distributor, MTV Films slated *Better Luck Tomorrow* for platform release, meaning that it would open first in only a few select cities, and then proceed throughout the nation only in stages, with each new opening dependent upon its evaluated success in preceding markets. This process differs from the simultaneous nationwide opening that is the industry practice for Hollywood films, and is usually applied to independent, foreign, and art films — that is, those films deemed relevant to only limited audiences. In an effort to promote the film, Lin circulated by internet an "open letter to Asian Americans," urging them to see the movie, and the film's actors traveled the country publicizing the necessity of box office success. As more and more Asian Americans learned of the issue, these campaigns expanded into additional print, web, and live efforts that began without any association with the film itself. Better Luck Tomorrow, Asian Americans were told, was poised to be "their She's Gotta Have It," referring to the breakthrough film by Spike Lee that made possible new trends in movies for and by African Americans. Were Better Luck Tomorrow to fail, it would be perceived within Hollywood as definitive proof of the limits of Asian American representation, and thus
would be a disaster for the Asian American community. These political
efforts to promote the film did not go unheeded: in its opening weekend in
Los Angeles and New York, the film turned a profit by grossing over a
million dollars. Equally significantly, the racial makeup of the audience
throughout its run was almost evenly divided between Asian and non-Asian
viewers, a fact that reassured Paramount, which recorded the data in an
obvious attempt to gauge the film’s mainstream appeal, that a film featuring
an all-Asian cast was capable of crossover appeal. Better Luck Tomorrow
would go on to build its profit throughout its platform release, and by year-
end the industry consensus was that the film was an undoubted success, with
box office earnings representing sixteen times its cost and the potential to
earn a great deal more by future DVD sales.

These grassroots efforts surrounding Better Luck Tomorrow to convert
platform to national release reveal a political understanding of the important
status of mainstream film in Asian American studies. By recognizing
the political capital in commercial cinema, the activism surrounding Better
Luck Tomorrow shows the Asian American community recognizing main-
stream cinema as a primary objective of attaining cultural equality. Such a
new understanding of Hollywood cinema in Asian American media was
indebted to the new interdependency of the world economy, a process of
globalization that advanced Asian American masculinity in The Guru and
assimilated the Hong Kong action traditions. As the global village increas-
ingly dictates Hollywood productions, Hollywood can only grow more sup-
portive of Asian American representation. Indeed, as the radical revisions in
Better Luck Tomorrow demonstrate, Asian Americans may just be the future
of Hollywood cinema, as the optimistic Joy Luck- and John Wo-
evoking title of the film implies. This is certainly the belief of Deepak
Chopra and the critically acclaimed film director, Shekhar Kapur (Elizabeth),
who recently formed a conglomerate to manage the Asian stars and creative
talent that they predict will increasingly dominate the global
entertainment markets previously monopolized by Hollywood. The signifi-
cance of such a change will be remarkable, both in numbers and symbolic
meaning. As globalization consolidates the whole world to the space of the
simultaneous opening that Hollywood currently gives mainstream films in
the US, says Kapur, “It is likely that by the end of this decade, a film like
Spider-Man 5 will open to a billion-dollar first weekend.” Asia, which
constitutes more than half the world’s population, will then determine box
office success – as Kapur forecasts, “Expect $700 million of that to be
generated from Asia.” More importantly, the centrality of Asia in global

Hollywood’s revenue must precipitate changes in mainstream content.
These will not register in gender and genre, but rather in the race of the
new Hollywood hero of the post-global era. Thus Kapur heralds, “Expect,
then, that when Spider-Man takes his mask off, he may be Chinese or
Indian.”

NOTES

I am grateful for the comments of Hosam Aboul-Ela, Margot Backus, Maria Gonzalez,
David Mazella, and Jane Park.

1. The exchange between Ebert, Lin, and the Sundance audience member appears in
most press coverage of the film. E.g., Mac Daniel, “Deal Drugs, Commit Murder.
Cram for Finals.”
2. Jae-Ha Kim, “Critical Approval Means Lin’s ‘Luck’ is Here to Stay.”
3. Some of these approaches are collected in Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimikawa,
Orientations.
4. Eugene Franklin Wong, On Visual Media Racism; Russell Leong, ed., Moving the
Image.
Experience,” 185.
6. Rebecca Louise, “Making Their Own ‘Luck.’”
7. Elvis Mitchell, “Teenagers Determined to Damage Their Resumes.”
8. Leong, Moving the Image, 191; Marina Heung, “Representing Ourselves: Films and
Videos by Asian American/Canadian Women”; Jun Xing, Asian America Through the
Lens; and Peter Feng, Identities in Motion.
11. bell hooks, Black Looks, 118.
12. Wong’s terms are “role segregation,” “role freedom,” and “role stratification.” They
name, respectively, the restriction of ethnic actors to ethnic roles only, the privilege
enjoyed by white actors to cannibalize ethnic roles by appearing in costumed and
cosmetized “race face,” and the likelihood that the more prominent an ethnic role,
the more likely that it will be cast with a white actor. Wong, On Visual Media Racism,
12–13.
13. Werner Sollors, Beyond Ethnicity.
Differences,” 26.
Paul Chan et al eds., The Big Ausieeee!, 8–11.
16. In 1993, Stone also directed Heaven & Earth and served as executive producer on
From Hollywood to Hanoi; both films deal with Vietnamese and Vietnamese American
subjects.
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CHAPTER 5

Gender Negotiations and the Asian American Literary Imagination

Wenxin Li

One of the most intriguing phenomena in Asian American literature has undoubtedly been the gender gap—a fissure roughly along gender lines in Asian American thinking and articulation about ethnic identity. Since the early 1970s when Asian America began in earnest to define itself, two distinct impulses, which Elaine Kim defines as feminist and nationalist (“Such” 75), have been competing for expression and recognition. Otherwise known as the Asian American “gender war,” this debate erupted upon the publication of Maxine Hong Kingston’s fictionalized memoir The Woman Warrior in 1976.1 While mainstream reviews were overwhelmingly positive, many Asian American writers and critics, in part reacting to its ready acceptance by white society, criticized the book for misrepresenting Chinese culture and tradition. The ensuing debate between the nationalist and feminist camps has dominated much of Asian American critical discourse ever since, resulting in heated exchanges on a number of issues concerning the roles of gender, race, and culture in the formation of an Asian American identity, with gender being the defining element.

While I value this debate for invigorating Asian American critical discourse and sharpening our critical perception, I also marvel at its tenacity and regret its personal nature because the prolonged warring atmosphere has divided the Asian American community. Insightful analyses of the gender strife by many Asian American scholars—including Elaine Kim, King-Kok Cheung, Sau-ling Wong, Jinqi Ling, and David Leiwei Li—have significantly contributed to our understanding of the key issues involved. By engaging their critiques, I hope to move beyond the Asian American gender divide toward the formulation of a more coherent Asian American