# WE'RE NOT JUST WINDOW DRESSING: ASIAN REPRESENTATION IN FILM AND TELEVISION

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It's nighttime in the city. The skyline is covered in neon lights and holograms and crisscrossed with highways, giving the city a distinctly futuristic, sci-fi feel. A woman stands at the edge of a rooftop, looking over. The only part of her visible to the viewer is her silhouette from the back. As the camera tracks closer and closer towards her and the view of the city, it becomes clear that the city is in Japan: Japanese characters adorn many of the buildings, holograms of human figures wear distinctly Japanese-style clothing and makeup, and you can hear Japanese voices mixed in with the English voice coming from the woman's radio. And yet, when the camera swings around to reveal the woman's face, we are confronted by none other than Scarlett Johansson—a white actress.

This is the opening scene of the 2017 film *Ghost in the Shell*. Of course, a white actress playing a character that is in Japan might not seem very controversial at first glance; there are many action films with white leads that might start out with a scene in a different country, but the casting of Scarlett Johansson as main character Major remains controversial because of the context of the film. *Ghost in the Shell* is based on a Japanese manga and anime of the same name, both of which star Japanese characters, yet the film chose to cast a white actress for the historically Japanese part. The character's name, as explained by the film's producers, was changed from "Major Motoko Kusanagi" to just "Major" to accommodate the change in the main character's race (Sun). Scarlett Johansson justified her own casting by saying that the character was "essentially identity-less," suggesting that the character's race didn't matter since the character had no identity while, probably unintentionally, implying that the default race is white (qtd. in Sun). Many were upset that the role was given to Johansson, despite the fantastic opportunity to give a lead role to an Asian actress. In a conversation between performers of Japanese

descent who watched the film, actress Keiko Agena spoke about how the movie was "such a star-making vehicle . . . and this could have made a young, kick-ass Asian actress out there a Hollywood name and star" (Sun). As an Asian American, I share this opinion and made the decision not to see the film. Judging by the film's poor box office performance and critical reception, many others made the same decision. The film made a little over $40 million in the US, compared to an estimated $110 million budget (IMDb), and holds a measly 44% on the film rating site Rotten Tomatoes.

The debate surrounding the representation of Asian Americans in North American film and TV is by no means a recent phenomenon. Early examples of the controversial representation of Asians in film include Mickey Rooney's offensive yellow-face portrayal of a Japanese man in the Blake Edwards-directed classic *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, and the use of white actors to portray the entire main cast of Chinese characters in the 1937 Sidney Franklin film *The Good Earth*. Of course, as time passed, such obvious examples of yellow-face became less and less common. However, this doesn't mean that the white-washing of Asian characters has become a thing of the past; it has simply taken on a new form, as evidenced by Scarlett Johansson's casting as Major in *Ghost in the Shell*. They no longer literally dress white actors up as Asian; instead, the race of the character—usually a character who has historically been Asian, or should be and easily could be—is rewritten as white or the white actor is given a fictional Asian heritage without looking or actually being Asian at all. Notable examples include white actress Emma Stone's casting as a character of Hawaiian and Asian descent in Cameron Crowe's *Aloha* (2015), the primarily white main cast of M. Night Shyamalan's *The Last Airbender* (2010), which is traditionally Asian-influenced, and the casting of black actor Chiwetel Ejiofor and white actress Mackenzie Davis as, according to the book the movie was based on, an Indian man and a Korean woman in Ridley Scott's *The Martian* (Davé). However, as the issue of Asian representation in American culture has gained more exposure, the conversation surrounding Asian representation has become more complex, growing to encompass issues such as cultural appropriation and racial stereotypes. As a result, it has also

complicated the question of what proper representation of Asian American culture and characters look like.

While *Ghost in the Shell* may seem like a relatively straightforward example of whitewashing—the making white of an Asian character—not every controversy faced in recent years has been so clear-cut. In 2017, Marvel Studios faced criticism for the casting of white actor Finn Jones as lead Danny Rand, a white Buddhist man who masters martial arts, in their Netflix series *Iron Fist*. Many Asian Americans took to social media to express their disappointment, creating the hashtag #AAIronFist and saying, amongst other things, that "Iron Fist is an orientalist-white-man-yellow-fever narrative. Asian actor would have helped subvert that offensive trope, and reclaim space" (@marjorieliu qtd. in Bramesco). The role could have gone to a Chinese man, saving the actor playing Rand the trouble of having to immerse himself in Chinese culture. However, the difference between this controversy and the *Ghost in the Shell* controversy was that Danny Rand is in fact white in the original Marvel comics, leading many to believe the controversy over the casting was unfounded. Despite this, a white actor playing this role made the character himself problematic, running the risk of appropriating Asian culture—specifically martial arts—with the purpose of glorifying a white man. As a white character, Danny Rand falls perfectly into the problematic white savior trope "in which a white visitor becomes the only one who can save a culture that's framed as 'less civilized,' while he or she also learns valuable lessons from the uncorrupted spirituality of the people" (Wheeler). Stories containing this trope therefore "treat non-white or non-Western cultures as exotic playgrounds for the improvement of white people," effectively reducing the non-white characters to props (Wheeler). In this case, Chinese culture is the "playground" that Danny Rand gets to play in.

Many, however, don't buy into these claims of cultural appropriation and the white savior trope. The creator of the series, Roy Thomas, defended the casting by saying that "it's all about a fictitious race, a fictitious place like Shangri-La, and one person who happens to be its emissary. There's no reason why he can't be Caucasian" (qtd. in Busch). Additionally, prominent Hong Kong actor Daniel Wu said that he doesn't "buy into the cultural appropriation bullshit because

that's saying [for Iron Fist] that 'only Asians are allowed to do martial arts' [and] only black people can play basketball and rap. . . . That's bullshit" (qtd. in Benjamin). And, of course, the fact remains that Danny Rand is established within the Marvel canon as a white man. It could be said that critics are overreacting—how could this be white-washing if Rand was white in the first place? Yet this casting decision still represents a missed opportunity to cast an Asian actor, which would solve both the white savior problem and the cultural appropriation problem. But if Marvel had cast a Chinese actor in the role of Danny Rand, would Marvel then have faced claims of playing into the Chinese martial art stereotype? It's entirely possible that they would have, but we'll never know, since Marvel ultimately cast Finn Jones. Regardless, given that martial arts are an intrinsic part of the Iron Fist story, a white lead just "makes it worse, relegating Asian martial artists only to the roles of villains, mentors, and goons" (Wheeler). It might be more worth the risk to play into stereotypes—stereotypes that can always be played down if needed—if it means an Asian American has a chance to take a prominent role.

It is this risk of playing into stereotypes that many refuse to take. While avoiding stereotypes remains an important part of the conversation around Asian representation, it is often used as an excuse for casting white actors in a potentially star-making role. Such roles could be revised to be less stereotypical and given to an Asian actor. Using the defense that a show or movie is trying to avoid stereotypes can make it seem like not casting Asian Americans actually benefits them. An example of this sort of thinking can be found in the explanations given for the casting of white actress Tilda Swinton as The Ancient One in Marvel's 2016 film *Dr. Strange*. The Ancient One is a Tibetan man in the comics and was changed into a Celtic woman in the film to fit Swinton's casting (Desta). This decision was met with much criticism, with the President of the Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA), Rob Chan, saying that "Given the dearth of Asian roles, there was no reason a monk in Nepal could not be Asian" (qtd. in Yee). However, the creative team behind the film explained that they had given the role to Swinton in an effort to undo the 'Dragon Lady' stereotype. Writer and director Scott Derrickson said, "Every iteration of that script played by an Asian woman felt like

a 'Dragon Lady'. . . . I moved away from that" (qtd. in Yee). The president of Marvel Studios, Kevin Feige, also defended the casting, saying in an interview with *Deadline*: "We didn't want to play into any of the stereotypes found in the comic books, some of which go back as far as 50 years or more. We felt the idea of gender swapping the role of The Ancient One was exciting. . . . Why not make the wisest bestower of knowledge in the universe to our heroes in the particular film a woman instead of a man?" (qtd. in Fleming). With this defense, Feige makes the case that their casting of The Ancient One was in fact progressive—not only did they avoid playing into stereotypes, but they also made the character a powerful woman rather than a man.

Derrickson's and Feige's explanations rely on flawed logic—in casting Swinton, they effectively took an opportunity away from an Asian actor or actress and gave it to a white actress, while at the same time saying that what they did was actually good for Asian representation and for social progress as a whole. As said by Guy Aoki, the co-founder of MANAA, "you could modify ANY problematic, outdated character and maintain its ethnicity . . . letting a white woman play the part . . . just erases an Asian character from the screen when there weren't many prominent Asian characters in Marvel films to begin with" (qtd. in Yee). Their explanation allows the studio to "promote itself as an agent for social change by transforming an Asian stereotype into an empowered white woman to move the audience past racist representations" (Nishime 30). Why couldn't they have cast Asian women instead, when that would have made the most sense in both cases? Why is it that casting a white woman in a role made for a person of color is considered progressive?

Linking whitewashing to notions of progressive change can be a dangerous path to go down. In a piece about whitewashing in science fiction films, Leilani Nishime explains how "the case of *Doctor Strange* vividly illustrates the imbrication of white-washing with narratives of racial uplift and globalization. . . . [It] [links] whitewashing to stories of racial progress so that imagining a nonracist future means imagining a white future," something that she calls a "disturbing" notion (30). Creating an abundance of white characters that think they would somehow benefit other races just leads to decreased diversity and increased racial erasure, along with the continued perpetua-

tion of the notion that white people are the dominant and default race. *Ghost in the Shell* falls victim to this "white future," ironically because of the plot twist that screenwriters included to attempt to justify why Scarlett Johansson's Major is white. Near the end of the film, Major finds out that she actually used to be Japanese before she was turned into a cyborg. Japanese actress Atsuko Okatsuka said, "the text at the beginning of the movie explained that Hanka Robotics is making a being that's the best of human and the best of robotics. For some reason, the best stuff they make happens to be white" (qtd. in Sun). By revealing that Major used to be Japanese, the film and its writers imply that creating a being that's "the best of human" involves putting Major into a white body. Nishime also explains in the same essay how, especially in science fiction films, Asian characters are seen as disposable. She points out that "these movies include ancillary Asian female characters as more than techno-orientalist window dressing" (31). By "more," she means that these characters are often robots, suggesting Asian people and their culture are reduced to a submissive and aestheticized "product" (Nishime 31). This tendency can be seen in Alex Garland's *Ex Machina*, where the Asian character is ultimately discarded for the empowerment of the white female character, playing into stereotypes about the compliant Asian woman (Nishime 31). In some instances, Asian characters aren't present at all: in Denis Villenueve's *Blade Runner 2049*, even though there are clear Asian influences on the aesthetic of the city in which it takes place, the film itself features no Asian characters.

This use of Asians as "window dressing" and "products," of course, is not only limited to science fiction movies. Wes Anderson's 2018 film *Isle of Dogs* was largely criticized for stereotyping Japanese culture despite a cast that featured Japanese actors and a Japanese co-writer who was brought in to ensure the accuracy of the film (Ramos). *Guardian* reviewer Steve Rose describes how "Anderson's alternative Japan . . . ticks off a great many tourist clichés. There is sushi, sumo wrestlers, cherry blossoms, taiko drummers," providing a very simplified, stereotypical view of Japan and its culture. In an essay for *BuzzFeed*, Alison Willmore talks about how the film shows "Japan purely as an aesthetic—and another piece of art that treats the East not as [being] a living, breathing half of the planet but as a mirror for

the Western imagination." Japan, and the fictional Japanese city of Megasaki in which the film takes place, is used simply as a backdrop, and not an intrinsic part of the story—had the story taken place anywhere else, it would have remained pretty much the same. The "tourist clichés" mentioned by Steve Rose are used mainly to make Anderson's film look pretty and seem quirky. Greta Gerwig's character Tracy Walker, an American exchange student in Japan, also perpetuates Asian stereotypes, as she leads "a singlehanded campaign to turn the tide of public opinion against Mayor Kobayashi [the antagonist of the film], thus reifying old stereotypes about Japanese passivity" and fulfilling the white savior trope (MacFarlane). It's interesting to see how Anderson chose to insert a white American as a central character when he just as easily could have written the character as Japanese. It could be a "symptom of treating Megasaki City as mere background, rather than an actual city filled with people who are able to recognize what's happening to their pets" (Song). Or perhaps it is an attempt to show how "one group is persuaded when an outsider brings a different perspective to see what's happening," as explained by *Isle of Dogs* co-writer Kunichi Nomura (qtd. in Song). Regardless, Walker's presence as a white person reinforces tired Asian stereotypes and makes the people of Japan look incompetent at dealing with the problems surrounding them. However, while it's easy to point out that these things are stereotypical, it's much more difficult to figure out how to represent and appreciate a different culture without accidentally presenting stereotypes and, as a result, aestheticizing the culture. With all of the different opinions about representation, there is no set of rules to follow that guarantees representation that pleases everyone.

Outside of visual stereotypes, a similar conundrum can be found in the discussion around heavy accents, which are especially prevalent amongst South Asian characters. Shilpa Davé calls this the "brown voice" in his essay, "Racial Accents, Hollywood Casting, and Asian American Studies." Davé emphasizes that it "operates as a racializing characteristic among South Asians that suggests both foreignness and familiarity in a US context" and is employed by both South Asians, such as Kunal Nayyer's character Raj on the CBS sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, and non-South Asians, such as the Hank Azaria-

voiced character Apu on *The Simpsons* (143). An initial reaction to this stereotype might be to just create more characters who speak with neutral accents, but the problem is more complex than it first appears to be. Davé notes that "one way to read some of these representations is to note that when characters speak with a 'neutral accent,' the plot-lines erase or bury racial and ethnic markers" (146). Essentially, the character is stripped of racial and cultural identity in favor of being racially neutral, which is not necessarily what people are looking for in terms of representation.

This concept can be applied outside the world of accents. If you were to write a completely race neutral character and then cast an Asian in the role, the character would be completely devoid of any non-physical characteristic that would mark them as Asian. For some, this would be an unrealistic representation, since Asians have unique cultural identities. Therefore, it's difficult to navigate how exactly an Asian character should be represented—it wouldn't be best to erase the character's Asian-ness altogether, but at the same time the character shouldn't be too much of a stereotype. Recently, there's been a push for Asians to play lead roles normally given to white actors or actresses, as exemplified by a popular campaign called #StarringJohnCho, which photoshops Korean-American actor John Cho into popular movie posters as the lead. Notable examples featured on the campaign's website include Cho as Captain America on the *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) poster and as James Bond on the *Spectre* (2015) poster (*Starring John Cho*). People are tired of not seeing Asians in lead roles, so why shouldn't Asians be stars? Why can't John Cho play the leading man in a Hollywood blockbuster? While this campaign is simply meant to ignite conversation about why the industry doesn't cast Asians in lead roles, it does pose the previous issue of how to present race on screen—if an Asian actor were to play a role originally written for a white lead, should the role then be re-written to match the character's race, or left as is? Does leaving the character written as is erase the character's Asian identity?

With all the nuances and complexities around representation, it's probably impossible to find a universal answer to the question of what proper representation of Asians and Asian cultures on screen should look like. Everyone, including those in the Asian American commu-

nity, has different opinions and outlooks on what they deem acceptable and unacceptable. While I refused to watch *Ghost in the Shell*, *Iron Fist*, and *Doctor Strange*, many of my Asian American friends saw and enjoyed them. Although I found the representation of Japan in *Isle of Dogs* to be problematic, when I asked my Asian American roommate about it she shrugged and said that she thought Wes Anderson was just paying homage to Japan, and she couldn't fault him for that. What remains consistent, however, is the fact that data has found "that America's increasingly diverse audiences prefer diverse film and television content," yet Asians continue to be underrepresented in film and television. Only 3.1% of film roles and 2.6% of roles on cable scripted shows went to Asians in 2016 (Hunt). While we might not reach a general consensus about how to properly increase representation of Asian actors on screen, it's important to keep having conversations about representation and to listen to all sides—especially the concerns that Asian Americans themselves have regarding their own representation.

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