

Arcadia University

Edward Said's *Orientalism*: Trapped in Time

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## “Orientalism”

Edward Said's theory, *Orientalism*, was written in 1978. Said's argument focused on the treatment of what is considered as “The East.” In his introduction, Said states that the European concept of the orient is the Far East, which includes Japan and China, while the American notion is known as the Middle East (Said 1-2). This specificity on the area is representative of the history of Europe versus the United States. His main criticism lies in the idea that Western cultures negatively view and represent Eastern cultures. The West has been able to belittle the East through the power that these cultures have acquired. This disparage presents negative images of the different Eastern cultures, which is used as a mechanism to make the West more powerful. This, in turn, has created the idea of the Other. The irony of this entire concept is that the West has been dependent on the East, therefore to create this disparity is a power play. This dependency has not only been for land, but also for raw materials. Orientalism has been a very successful way for Western cultures to gain power. Furthermore, art has been a way to represent the cultures of the East. However, many of the representations have been created by the West and are used to create stereotypical images of multiple cultures (Said 21).

Said organizes *Orientalism* by looking at three main concepts. He describes the way in which the Orient can be studied, such as for its culture. Academic study, he believes, is how the Orient can continue to exist (Said 2). However, the question he is inquiring about is who is bringing the information about the Orient to the forefront. This is especially important in terms of what culture that person is from. Second, Said describes the Orient through the definition. Although this might not be an exact and written definition, it is the comparison between the academic and what he calls the “imaginary” (Said 3). The imaginary definition essentially means the way in which people, such as writers, have used the concept as a way to create stories

throughout time. This means that the stories that have been created are not necessarily based on fact. Therefore, the conception of these stories is meant to further enhance the distinction between the East and the West through misrepresentation. Third, Said describes how the Orient has been used for power. Specifically, he utilizes Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge and Discipline and Knowledge* to demonstrate to his audience that "Orientalism is a Western style for dominating, reconstructing, and having authority over the Orient." (Said 3) His meaning here is that the Occident can evoke power over the Orient, and focused on how this strength over the culture has been seen throughout history. These three main concepts are important because Said was able to explain his goal on how the Orient was constructed.

### **The "Other"**

Anthropology is the study of human interactions and cultures. This is an important study to understand because it allows society to view the development of mankind throughout time. People like to live by order and stability, and both of these ideas are constructs. In order to maintain the status quo, people have created systems that are recognized because they prevent change. These systems are similar to the idea of the "haves" who are part of mainstream society and the "have nots" who are part of a different culture. The "have nots" in this case are those who are being "othered" because they are different. This process has to deal with creating power through the degradation of someone else. In the journal article, "The Hall of Mirrors: Orientalism, Anthropology, and the Other", the author William S. Sax describes that the Other is a concept that is unknown and "exotic" that people try to understand (Sax 292). Sax recognizes Said as one of the most influential professors in the study of the Other. The author states, "Nevertheless, we do in practice make distinctions among cultures, and this brings us back to the dialectics of sameness and difference. According to Said, any division of humanity into "us" and

“them” leads to “hostility,” and this hostility may be unavoidable, so that the division of humanity into different cultures is (perhaps inevitably) a dehumanizing activity,” (Sax 293). The issue that exists here is that through the process of “othering” another person, hostility is created. No matter how someone is separated from the society from which he or she lives in, the dichotomy exists between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” Society is unable to accept another culture. Rather, they are only able to appreciate it from afar, while also using it for their own benefit. The use could be for multiple reasons, such as to gain land or to gain precious jewels that will be used to become economically successful. Degrading others is an extremely easy way for someone to achieve what they please. Furthermore, through the use of “othering” cultures can become lost mainly due to this idea that in order to be accepted into a society, the person from an outside culture must assimilate into the existing culture. When this happens, traditions are unable to continue on, othering can still occur through a difference of looks alone, and the overarching culture will still remain in power.

Humans tend to notice differences because that is a part of human nature. Sax continues to describe in his journal article that, “Our tendency to focus on that which divides human beings from each other, to focus on difference, is something that all humans share. We cannot help noticing that other people speak different languages, observe different customs, and are, well, different: Other,” (Sax 299). Everyone comes from a different culture and background. Sax argues that Said understood that the physical differences that people have are impossible to miss, and this further creates the Other (Sax 293). Sax’s issue with Said is that Said believes that the Other is a “vilified” term (Sax 299). The reason for Sax’s disapproval of Said’s theory of the Other is that from an anthropological standpoint, people will always recognize when someone is different from them and using the Other does not always mean to separate by high and low status

(Sax 293-294). Furthermore, people can appreciate other cultures, learn about them, and reflect on their own values and traditions.

### **Political Instrument**

Through the creation of the Other is the creation of power. Power is something that many nations wish to acquire. For Western cultures, control has been gained through colonization in Asia and Africa, as well as through trade deals that were made. In addition, people who were a part of the oriental culture would help in maintaining the connection with Europe because of the alliance that would be gained. Said views that there is a more political use of Orientalism in European culture than in American culture because America has used this concept in a more academic manner (Said 10). This distinction is important, especially as American culture also views the Other in a different manner, such as within its own country. However, in terms of Orientalism, the Near East, also known as the Middle East, is the area in which American culture has made into the Other. For Americans, this has been highly politicized (Said 26). In the journal article "Orientalism Now," the author argues that the creation of the Other with Orientalism has to deal with issues within the Occident itself (Prakash 199). The significance of this is that Prakash is arguing that rather than the Orient having true "issues" that need to be corrected, the West is the one who not only created the issue, but also has an issue that is occurring within themselves. Prakash views Said's *Orientalism* as a way for the West to be able to view its own issues. This means that if European countries did not colonize but only met and traded with those in the East, then the West would not feel fulfilled because there was no power movement involved.

Prakash argues that Orientalism allows for a war with a culture. He states that, "Such charged responses questioned Said's claim that 'Orientalism is fundamentally a political

doctrine' (204), that the course of the Western pursuit of truth, crisscrossed with racist power and cultural supremacist, licensed the pillage of Other cultures in the name of disinterested scholarship," (Prakash 202). This idea of using supremacy to destroy other cultures has caused people to lose interest in their own cultures, because they feel the need to assimilate into the society that already exists. As time continues on, entire cultures can become lost in time and only found through written word. Younger generations who assimilate into a culture can also suffer from a lack of cultural understanding within their own families because they do not take the time to learn about their heritage or language.

*Orientalism* is considered to be an attack on Marxism, according to the article "The Specters of Marx in Edward Said's *Orientalism*." The authors Manfred Sing and Mirian Younes have used the theory of Orientalism to expand on concepts that Said is missing. They critique how Said considers Karl Marx an Orientalist. More specifically, they look at the way in which Said criticizes Arab Marxists. They state, "[H]e directly criticized the Arab Marxists' belief in progress and modernity...A second explanation is that Arab critics were unwilling to understand Said's refined critique of representations because they were dogmatists and only interested in defending Karl Marx whom Said had criticized for being an Orientalist. Therefore, they "misconstrued" Said's words to prove that he was a typically bourgeois scholar who simply overlooked class differences inside each culture," (Sing and Younes 152). Said is viewed negatively in this sense, because he is not considering the Arab Marxists due to a stereotype that is placed on him, as he is called "bourgeois". Bourgeois is a French term that refers to the middle class, which therefore is taking away some of his credibility because describing him in this manner would push him further away from his own theory.

### **Academic Tradition and a World View**

While the terms “oriental” and “orientalism” are not highly regarded in use, academically, they are of high significance. Said believes that these words may not be favorable to the changing times, however, they will continue to exist in academics through multiple areas of study because it assists in creating the negative connotation of the past. The idea of orientalism can be studied through multiple concentrations, such as in anthropology and history. These two are important because anthropology is the study of human interaction, and history can take a look at the treatment of the Orient through different perspectives. In the journal article “Edward Said,” the author Catherine Hall is presenting her essay she presented at the twenty-fifth anniversary of his theory through a British perspective. Hall describes that Said made it so the British, in her case, could understand themselves and their reasons for colonization because of the gained knowledge of the East. She says, “Drawing on Foucault's notion of discourse he examined the Western European constructions of those who lived in the Middle East, and the ways in which orientalist discourse became, in Foucault's terminology, a regime of truth... Truth resided in the power of writers and academics to tell stories of the Orient that claimed successfully to represent it,” (Hall 236). The dynamic that existed, according to Hall, was based on making the Orient fantasized. The fantasy of the East is the imagination of what the culture is like, and it can also be including fetishism of the culture. Said’s idea is that Orientalism is considered a world view. He states, “The exteriority of the representation is always governed by some version of the truism that if the Orient could represent itself, it would; since it cannot, the representation does the job, for the West, and *faute de mieux*, for the poor Orient,” (Said 21). The Orient is unable to represent themselves properly due to the fact they have been constantly misrepresented by other cultures. Said argued that the Oriental culture has not been truly studied because it has been viewed through the eyes of a myth. Sax, in his article

“The Hall of Mirrors: Orientalism, Anthropology, and the Other,” uses the Disraeli quote that “‘The Orient is a career’” (Sax 292). While the Orient has become an area of academic study to understand, Sax is arguing that those who study orientalism are only studying their construction of it rather than the true culture.

Although the United States has mainly been looked at in regard to the Middle East, it also gained more control in the imperial realm during the nineteenth century (Said 294). In the article “Edward Said and American Studies,” the author John Carlos Rowe took a critical look at how much of the United States imperial effect has grown over time. He states, “For Said, political responsibility included cultural, educational, and human obligations to understand peoples and regions hitherto represented either as caricatures or not at all,” (Rowe 44). This look at *Orientalism* is meant to understand the humans behind the issue, rather than just the images created through stories. Rowe is supporting Said as he views Said as someone who was attempting to fix the issue of representation. On the other hand, some people have different cynical views on Said’s thesis. In the journal article “‘Orientalism’ and Its Critics,” the author Fred Halliday’s main concern lies in the interpretation of the Middle East because he views it as “pre-modernist” (Halliday 146). Halliday’s argument is that there is a debate on how one should write about the Middle East (Halliday 148). All in all, Halliday finds the term “orient” to be vague. Halliday states, “...it prevents us from addressing how the issues discussed by the Orientalists and the relations between East and West are presented in the region itself... stereotyping the projection of timeless and antagonistic myths, this is in no sense a prerogative of the dominator, but also of the dominated.” (Halliday 160-161). Halliday also believes that the myths that have been created have lasted for too long. The issue he has is that the myths that have been created are continually told and brought down from generation to generation, which



will therefore create false images and change a culture. In the journal article, "Introduction: Edward Said and after: Toward a New Humanism" the author Matthew Abraham explores the way in which Said was a humanist in his work. He states, "Said advocated a New Humanism that would affirm the highest aspirations of culture while also working against the pitfalls of identitarian thinking, which propels national and religious enthusiasm," (Abraham 1).

Identitarian means Europeans who believe that certain territories belong to them based on their identity and power. Abraham is supportive of Said's concepts as he sees that Said was trying to implement change as a humanist.

### **Construction of the Orient**

The Orient is a social construct created by people who wanted power. In the journal article "Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism," the author Arif Dirlik argues that the construction of the Orient is twofold. In order for the West to have been able to create the Orient, the people in the East also had to participate in making the Orient (Dirlik 96). This does not mean that they willingly wanted to be considered lesser than the Occident, rather, they submitted to the will of what was occurring during that time. Dirlik quotes Said's "Orientalism Reconsidered," stating, "Orientalism . . . refers to several overlapping domains: first, the changing historical and cultural relationship between Europe and Asia, a relationship with a 4000-year-old history; second, the scientific discipline in the west according to which, beginning in the early nineteenth century, one specialized in the study of various Oriental cultures and traditions; and, third, the ideological suppositions, images and fantasies about a currently important and politically urgent region of the world called the Orient. The relatively common denominator between these three aspects of Orientalism is the line separating Occident from Orient and this, I have argued, is less a fact of nature than it is a fact of human production, which

I have called imaginative geography,” (Dirlik 97). This idea of “imaginative geography” provides insight on how the Orient is created because it is all based on location. He is arguing that there are these ideas that exist, or world views, that have been implemented into the masses without any true physical evidence. Said describes that authority is not mysterious because it is all set-in stone from the beginning and has a direct plan (Said 19-20). When the Orient is formed, the Europeans or Americans that continue to play a role in this are knowledgeable about the effect it will have on the culture.

### **Asian Representations of the Other**

Asian cultures and people have been a prominent example in the process of othering a culture. This othering has mainly been used historically to create a distinction between Europe and Asia, but America has also created a separation in the culture. In the case for Europe, the use of the Other has meant to gain control and power. However, in more recent years, it has been shown to maintain the separation in the cultures. Most of the time, when discussing the process of “othering,” it is done by one society to another. One would not think that someone in a culture would permit othering in their culture. However, this has been the case from the beginning. When the Occident culture came to the Oriental culture, those who were a part of the East would be willing to help the west gain control. This is similar to the idea that during slave trades, those who were living in the African country would help to capture people for labor. Said states, "Orientalism is not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship, or institutions; nor is it a large and diffuse collection of texts about the Orient; ... Indeed, my real argument is that Orientalism is and does not simply represent a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world,” (Said 12). The Orient has not only been a way to create a dichotomy

between the West and the East, but also can be understood with how people have become accustomed to judging other people.

In the article “Orientalism versus Occidentalism?”, the author begins by telling a recent story: “Inside China, some scholars or critics attack film directors Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige whose successes in various international film festivals depend largely upon their being recognized by Western scholars and critics because their films are regarded as a version of Orientalism, or more exactly, as images made exclusively for a Western audience,” (Ning 57). While the use of the Other has constantly been an issue from outside forces, it is currently being seen within their own culture. As this occurs, there will be a loss of a true culture because of the need for recognition by the West. Furthermore, Ning describes a downside to this is that many students take classes to be able to move to the West, which will further create the dichotomy in having cultures be proud for how they exist. When the directors create films that are causing a further separation from their own culture, they are only feeding into the power dichotomy that was creating generations before them. Said wants people to stop focusing on the colonial past of Asian countries, and to rather focus on new ways of looking at those cultures (Ning 59-60). While Asian cultures have been continued to be looked at as the Other through Western eyes, the knowledge that exists can help to continue to develop an understanding of each other’s perspective culture.

### **“The Imaginary”**

Imagination has its advantages when telling the most miraculous stories. Children are continually influenced to let their imagination run wild. This exposure is necessary for when children become adults as they use this skill to “think outside of the box.” Creativity allows for change, but one question remains: How can using your imagination lead to negative results?

Stories provide an escape from reality and the creator has the right to create any type of story that they desire. However, sometimes a writer's intentions do not transfer over well to an audience, or their intentions are unfortunately to create an offensive story.

One of Edward Said's main points in his theory of Orientalism is that there is an "imaginary" definition of the East. The views of the Orient are constantly changing and have been portrayed differently throughout time. Stories are created and extend the truth in many cases. They can take aspects of a culture and reimagine it, as well as change it to portray a stereotype. The stories that are created delineate cultures more by creating this image of the "Other". By othering a culture, or even a group of people, this can create a mindset in the audience's minds that this behavior is acceptable in society. Although audiences should be able to filter what they see on screen versus real life, there are some who are unable to, which only creates further problems in real life situations.

One of the most influential mediums is film. Since the creation of film in 1892, audiences have been able to connect and apply what they see on the screen to real life. By portraying a whole culture negatively on the screen, directors, actors, and all of those involved in production and post-production aid in the separation in cultures, rather than creating appreciation. By utilizing the other, creators are preventing change from occurring. Film is a very influential medium because almost every single person on earth has access to it. Therefore, when many negative images are promoted, it will be difficult to change the minds of the mass audiences. Film is also a way to educate people, as some people may not have access to the same education. If this form is used to other people, then those that do use film as a tool to learn may treat cultures the way they view them on the screen. This is also hard to prevent because executives who create the movies have the final say, and may assume that all

audiences are like him or her, when this is not the case as social disparities exist. It is very important for people to complete research and understand a culture before actually portraying it on the screen.

This paper will evaluate four films throughout time that have multiple noteworthy characteristics. The four films are *The Good Earth*, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, *Flower Drum Song*, and *Crazy Rich Asians*. The films cover a range of time periods, from 1937 to 2018. While some films may have made progress in the past, such as by portraying Asian characters with Asian actors, many films failed to have proper representation. Today, more films are very self-aware and attempt to portray cultures properly.

### **Whitewashing in Film**

Film is continually evolving and it is not surprising that films from the past may be socially incorrect in today's progressive society. While films in the past may be looked at as the "Golden Age of Hollywood" because of the classic, beautiful storylines, there are also many issues that exist within those films. The main concern that this paper will focus on is the way in which imagination led to the negative portrayals of Asian people. In the article "A Brief History of Whitewashing in Film," the author Eddie Falvey uses a quote from Richard Dyer that states "other people are raced, [white people] are just people," showing disparity that exists. Whitewashing in film is using white actors to portray non-white characters. Besides the lack of representation that is created through this, this causes people in other cultures to not have anyone to look up or connect to. Also, society creates a false image around a whole group of people based on the stereotypes that exist. Ken Padgett states in the article "Yellowface in Film and TV" that there are five types of stereotypical Asian characters that exist. This includes the "Oriental" who has "fortune-cookie wisdom," the

“silly sidekick,” the “evil Asian” that dealt commonly with murder and opium, “the dragon lady” that was a sexualized Asian woman, and the assimilated Asian Americans (Padgett).

Whitewashing had become very common because it allowed for top celebrities to appear in films. Having a high tier personality comes with a guaranteed viewership as well as commercial success. Today, whitewashing is unfortunately still a huge issue. Many films and actors’ names are now synonymous with whitewashing. A top billing actress, for example, that has portrayed characters of Asian descent is Scarlett Johansson in the film *Ghost in the Shell* (Rose). The author of the *Guardian* article “‘The Idea That It’s Good Business is a Myth’-Why Hollywood Whitewashing Has Become Toxic” examines how the British actor Ed Skrein chose the proper option when resigning from playing a Japanese-American character. Keith Chow, an editor for the “Nerds of Color” blog is quoted in the *Guardian* article as he was “blown away by the news... He is probably the first actor to do something like this in such a public way.” The problem here is that the casting choice from the very beginning of the process should not have been a British actor. Resigning from the role was a very righteous decision, especially since other actors defend whitewashing. Of course, the defense is necessary on their part to prevent the film from losing money, however, it is definitely not politically correct. Having representation, Rose argues, is extremely important to those who have been unfairly treated. The counterargument that Rose discusses is that white audiences feel as if there is no issue, stating “it’s only a movie.” With this type of feeling existing, resolving the issue of whitewashing, especially among Hollywood executives, who have been known to be predominately white males, will take time.

The question that still remains is: Can audience members still enjoy watching films knowing that the underlying message behind certain scenes and characters were racist or xenophobic? Each of the films that will be discussed will look at this issue of whitewashing or the positives that they brought to society. Unfortunately, many of the greatest films ever made are tainted due to the lack of representation as well as negative depictions of Asian cultures. The main way to watch a film while combating the negative social images is by being aware that they exist and educating oneself about the time period. Disassociation is very important in this case. By creating some sort of separation with oneself and the film, the viewer can still enjoy the film.

### ***The Good Earth (1937)***

Pearl S. Buck is best known for her novel *The Good Earth*, written in 1931. A few years after its release, this classic book about life in a Chinese village was turned into the 1937 film starring Paul Muni and Luise Rainer. Buck herself grew up in Zhenjiang, China and returned to China after college to teach (*Pearl S. Buck*). Although she was originally born in the United States to missionaries, her knowledge and experience of living in China gives her credibility to tell this tale. The historical, romantic drama tells the story of Wang Lung, a farmer who marries O-Lan, a slave from the Great House. The triumphant narrative shows how Wang begins to succeed, O'Lan has three children, and then a drought and famine affects the village. As the Great House declines and family does what it can to survive, the drought ends. Wang Lung becomes wealthy and owns the Great House, where he gains a second wife. Audiences see the hardship that O-Lan endures. This adaptation is one of the greatest examples of classic Hollywood, with this film winning two Oscars and being nominated for three other Oscars.

One of the main controversies with *The Good Earth* is the casting decisions. Although some actors were of Asian descent, such as Keye Luke and Roland Lui who portrayed Wang Lung's sons, all of the lead actors were foreign actors popular with American audiences. Paul Muni, an Austrian man, played Wang Lung and was formerly in *Scarface* and *The Story of Louis Pasteur*. Luise Rainer, a German actress, played O-Lan and is known for *The Great Ziegfeld* and received Best Actress in a Leading Role for her portrayal of O-Lan. Although there were Asian American actors that could have played these roles, as well as other characters, they were passed over for these well-known actors (Rojas). This occurs because white actors reach the mass white audiences better, as they can connect with the characters. According to the article "Yellowface in Film and TV," Anna May Wong was a well-known Chinese-American film star who was considered for the leading role of *The Good Earth* (Padgett). Wong stated in an interview that "There seems little for me in Hollywood, because... producers prefer Hungarians, Mexicans, American Indians for Chinese roles." While she was offered the role of a villain in the film, she refused it as this would be a negative representation of Asian culture and the role went to Tilly Losch (Padgett). Although Pearl S. Buck wanted the cast to be of Chinese descent, Irving Thalberg, a producer, chose the American-known actors and stated, "I'm in the business of creating illusions," (Padgett). This further exemplifies Said's idea of the imaginary. Thalberg felt that the lack of representation was just because film is a way to tell a story, and does not mean it has to be true to the origins. However, this causes the film to age poorly, as society's values have changed. Yet, even with these existing issues from the past, it is important to recognize this film is from 1937 and therefore these issues were very prominent in society. To be able to enjoy this story is still possible if one recognizes that it was a completely different time.

### ***Breakfast at Tiffany's (1961)***



Truman Capote's novel turned film by director Blake Edwards is an award-winning movie that tells the story of Holly Golightly, a girl living in New York, and Paul Varjak, who wants to be a writer. The tale is comedic and romantic, as the audience hopes for the two protagonists to end up with each other by the end of the film. The story focuses on Holly's career as an escort, her goals to marry rich, and her love for her brother as well as the relationship she builds with Paul. Like Holly, Paul has to do "work" that he does not want to do as a way to support himself since he has not had his work published in five years. Although their relationship and growth as people are the main focus of the film, there is another aspect that has received a lot of criticism. Mickey Rooney, an American actor known for working with Judy Garland, portrays Mr. Yunioshi, Holly's Japanese neighbor. From the very beginning of the film, Mr. Yunioshi is portrayed negatively, with Rooney's eyes taped back, he has buck teeth, and uses a poor accent while speaking with broken English. This is a stereotypical image of an Asian man that was deemed comedic in 1961 by both Rooney, the director, and audiences. This was one of the ways Asian characters were shown on the screen and humor appealed to large audiences, especially as they did not understand the harm that came with it. Although Rooney stated he had regrets about the character four decades after the film came out, he did not see a problem with the portrayal because they truly were just having fun with the character.

While there may be characters in the film that the audience may not like, such as the women who are attempting to have a relationship with Paul, Mr. Yunioshi is a negative and outright mean person. He does not like Holly and gets annoyed very easily when she needs him to buzz her in since she forgot her keys. While the image that is created around Mr. Yunioshi is negative, it also is important to recognize that during this time, Hollywood executives had tight control of the actors they were using. The actors and actresses did not always have a say in

characters, so even if Rooney had been more self-aware by stating he did not want to play the offensive character, there was a very little chance that anything regarding this would have changed.

This film was made 16 years after World War II and there was an influx of Asian immigrants coming to America during this time period. With the feelings from World War II still existing, the images that were portrayed on screen were reminiscent of how many people felt. According to the article “Racism and Anti-Japanese Imperialist Propaganda in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*”, the author states that, “Especially given the passing of FDR’s Executive Order 2066 (1945) which called for the internment of Japanese Americans, xenophobic attitudes prevailed,” (Rey). The fear that existed around Japanese immigrants created an unfortunate platform for the film industry to use. This is why people did not have an issue with seeing these images on their screens. Hollywood knew of the existing, mass feelings towards Asian immigrants and used that to their advantage on the screen.

### ***Flower Drum Song* (1961)**

Another film directed in 1961, *Flower Drum Song* is an award-winning Rodgers and Hammerstein musical about Mei Li (Miyoshi Umeki), an illegal Chinese immigrant in America who is meant to marry nightclub owner Sammy Fong (Jack Soo), but the owner wants to marry Linda Low (Nancy Kwan), one of the show girls. This musical was also adapted from the book *The Flower Drum Song* by C. Y. Lee. Although this film and *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* were both released in 1961, this film was much more progressive for its time. The reason for this is that many of the actors casted in this film were actually of Asian descent, which prevents whitewashing from occurring. Originally a Broadway show, the director Gene Kelly went to

Chinatown with C. Y. Lee and found Jack Soo (Kim). The determination to have true representation is truly inspiring to see in a time where cultures had very little depictions.

This film dives into an issue that exists with the Chinese culture. The issue that they are looking at is the move from a traditional life to modernization. When Mei Li is arranged to marry Sammy, the owner of the night club, Sammy would rather marry the girl he is in love with, which goes against tradition. Although the film is not poking fun at the Chinese culture, one could say that the storyline still creates a negative image of it. A huge problem that existed within society was the illegal Chinese immigrants. In the article “‘Flower Drum Song’ Whitewashing, and Operation Wetback: A Message from 1961,” Kim describes how Chinese immigration had been restricted since 1882, and during the 1950s, the process of coming to America was strict. There was imprisonment of immigrants on Angel Island, and only children of businessmen in the U.S. would be allowed to enter. There was also a fear in the U.S. that the Chinese immigrants were communists. The use of an illegal Chinese immigrant in Mei Li is important to note, as this did not exist within the original novel (Kim). However, this was a way to attempt to bring change in society as the immigration policies were race based.

Of course, this film is much more progressive than Mickey Rooney’s portrayal of Mr. Yunioshi. However, the film is criticizing traditional Chinese culture and promoting assimilation into the American culture. Many people in multiple cultures try to preserve their culture. By assimilating, one loses what it means to be, for example, Chinese. Although one may say this means the film is telling Asian Americans to forget about their culture, it is also spreading the message that it is important to know one’s culture. The film has a happy ending as Sammy is able to be with Linda and Mei Li can be with Wang Ta. Yet, there is a threat of deportation for Mei Li, showing how society still had a way to go into accepting others (Kim).

### **Looking at the Present with *Crazy Rich Asians***

One of the best ways to understand the improvements that are occurring in society is to understand the films that are being created currently. Looking at the past is necessary to know how society has moved ahead. *Crazy Rich Asians* came out in 2018, and is based on the book series by Kevin Kwan. The romantic comedy is about Rachel Chu (Constance Wu) going to Singapore with her boyfriend Nick Young (Henry Golding), who she learns to be crazy rich. Rachel has to deal with Nick's family, and a life she is unaccustomed to. Rachel is treated poorly by Eleanor, Nick's mother, and her relationship with Nick is placed in jeopardy. The film itself won 12 awards, including a Golden Globe for best actress, and was nominated for 62 awards.

*Crazy Rich Asians* has broken barriers in the film world. In the article "Asian Representation in Film: The Impact of 'Crazy Rich Asians,'" Nam states that a study from USC Annenberg showed that "out of 1,100 films, 70.7% of the characters were Caucasian and only 6.3% were of Asian descent... [and] movie audiences have had very limited exposure on the big screen to the diversity they most likely see in everyday life." Although there is no whitewashing in this film, pre-production proved to be an issue, as Kevin Kwan was asked if Rachel could be portrayed by a white actress (Nam). The film has grossed \$236 million dollars and has proven to be a huge success (Nam). By representing Asian characters properly, they could set a criterion for future films, especially as *Crazy Rich Asians* was the first film in 25 years since *The Joy Luck Club* to feature an all Asian cast (Ho). The fact that it took so long for there to be another film with an Asian cast is truly surprising, but it also demonstrates how Hollywood prioritizes white audiences over other cultures.

Even with the positive change that *Crazy Rich Asians* has brought, there are still problems that can be addressed. Change takes time. In the article “One Way That *Crazy Rich Asians* is a Step Backward,” Mark Tseng-Putterman compares the film to *The Great Gatsby*. These two stories are comparable as Jay Gatsby has to assimilate to be part of the upper class. The film, according to the director, was meant to depict the old, classic Hollywood style to show the capabilities of Asian actors. Similar to Jay, Rachel goes to Singapore with the upper class. Putterman also brings up issues that exist within the content of the film itself, as Ken Jeong’s character uses a poor Chinese accent, which plays into the hands of existing stereotypes. Having this stereotypical image could potentially touch white audiences more, who are used to seeing that image being portrayed. There is also criticism in the fact that the Asian cultures that exist in Singapore are not all properly represented, and there is a showing of Chinese wealth rather than the other issues that exist. However, even with the issues that may exist, the film is a stepping stone towards the right direction.

### **Conclusions**

From 1937 to 2020, a lot of positive change has occurred. Asian cultures were being represented poorly as the use of white actors was mainstreamed. Having a notable cast with an existing audience is one of their ways to ensure success of a film. By doing this, they undermine those who do not have a voice within the film industry. Whitewashing still seems to be an issue within Hollywood, despite all of the efforts that have been made. *The Good Earth*, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, *Flower Drum Song*, and *Crazy Rich Asians* all have their uplifting as well as poor decisions, but each new bit of change will lead to a greater outcome. Cultures need to be able to be appreciated through the screen as it is the biggest distributor of

information. Hollywood has made mistakes, audiences can dissociate themselves to enjoy the film, understand the problems, and help move society into the future.

### **Issues Beyond Film**

Film is an artistic expression that has proven to bring change. However, there are issues for those of Asian descent still existing that will take time to heal. While many efforts have been made to create a sense of appreciation of Asian cultures, the issues that occur within society itself can create separations. Most recently, a deadly disease originating from Wuhan, China, has affected the entire world. Similar to the 2002 SARS outbreak that originated in China, COVID-19 has had a detrimental effect on how people live their lives as many countries are facing quarantines. The COVID-19 pandemic does not discriminate against anyone. However, xenophobia against Asian people has raised, such as the *Mulan* actor Tzi Ma being told he should be in quarantine since he is Asian (Yap). While film may be a way to bring about change, it seems as if society is taking a step backwards during these difficult times.

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