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Correcting the Concept of Asian Representation in Film

Asian representation in American cinema has come a long way and made a lot of progress since Asians first started appearing in and creating films; but with all progress for anything, there's always a question of if it was done in the right way and if it was set in the right direction to get to where it is now. It is evident when Asian film creators first started featuring Asian stories on screen, they were trying to capture the beauty and wonder of Asian culture. This is seen in films such as *Toll of the Sea* and *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, and that pattern continues now to films like *Crazy Rich Asians* and *Shang Chi*. However, along the way, I think it can also be said that how Asians have been portrayed on film has been misconstrued and heavily reliant on stereotypes too. Granted, due to early laws in America, Asians weren't given much of a fair chance to represent themselves in a very positive light to begin with; but as the times have changed and society has progressed, we should have seen maturity in how to create "Asian-based films" and not still need to build a movie upon negative stereotypes anymore. Yet, I argue that Asian filmmaking wasn't headed in the right direction for a bit until recently when we were given movies like *The Farewell* and *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. As demonstrated in these 2 films, in order to achieve true, good Asian representation, it is necessary to find a balance between using Asian trimmings and features while unfolding a good plot, not reliant on stereotypes, but one that can still be universally received, where it seems like the discernment, between whether the film is an Asian movie or a universal movie, is unclear. In exemplifying appropriate Asian representation, cinema that has been popular among the American audience hasn't been going in the right direction following that formula, due to the fact that the idea of Asian representation has since been thwarted firstly by racial laws, then by stereotypical type-casting, and lastly, by creating movies where society has believed that merely having Asians present is enough for good Asian representation, yet while still placing them in negative, stereotypical lights; due to these setbacks, good, respectful Asian representation cannot be achieved because it does not reach the sweet spot in creating art that should be placing

appreciation of Asian culture and heritage together while marrying it with a fair and universal story, which are the necessary components to achieving true Asian representation.

In the early 1900's, there were trailblazers for Asian representation such as Sessue Hayakawa and Anna May Wong. Sessue Hayakawa faced many setbacks in his career due to his race such as the rise of anti-Asian sentiment around wartime as well as due to the rise in immigration. This firstly led Hayakawa's career to be one filled with mostly just villain roles. In *The Cheat* (1915) he is not originally seen as the villain at first, but was given a fair chance at seeming like a polite gentleman who was good friends with spoiled, white woman Edith Hardy. Yet the film easily takes a dark turn when Hayakawa's character infamously brands Edith on the shoulder with a Japanese sign of his ownership. This is interesting because this film originally provided opportunity for fair Asian representation with Hayakawa being an esteemed man of good fortune, this feature unveils a plot that is simply not race-based at all and universal. But when Japanese-esque violence comes into the picture, race has blatantly entered as a factor in this movie and because of the already anti-Asian sentiment due to over-immigration the decade before, the Asian man must inevitably be the bad guy of the story. In *The Secret Game* (1917) he also plays a role that ends up doing evil as well but this time, with hints of romance. Yet, even being the attractive "bad boy" he was to women at the time, in the film his character could not earn the love of the character of Kitty and in turn, sacrificed himself for honor. This also provides an interesting twist as well because his character was dubbed as a very clever man and in the end does a traditional and honorable deed to end his life, all good things; but during the middle of the movie, he makes an attempt at Kitty that could, at face-value, look inappropriate, meaning he doesn't escape this movie with a clean slate. Thus, a notable thing in both these movies involving Sessue Hayakawa is that though they were set up to always seem like he will be a normal character and maybe the movie will be a good plot with surprisingly someone else as the villain, Hayakawa always played a character that could never win. And I think it says a lot about how Hollywood viewed Asian placement in films early on, with these examples giving birth to the obvious trend of type-casting; and it wasn't just Sessue that suffered from them. Anna May Wong had a difficult time in Hollywood even after her breakout role in *Toll of the Sea* (1922) where in the movie, there were so many Asian trimmings with beautiful shots of Chinese scenery and costume, shaping up to possibly be an appreciative movie of Asian culture; yet the racism inevitably shone through when her "China Doll" character's love leaves her and their

child for another white woman. Wong then goes on to play other roles on the opposite side of the spectrum such as the mysterious, scheming woman in *Shanghai Express* (1932) who is raped in the film and ends up stabbing the bad guy to death. Though these roles are seemingly unrelated, by that time, Wong had already caught on to the pattern in Hollywood and was fed up, in a 1933 interview saying "We are not like that... We have our own virtues... rigid code of behavior, of honor. Why don't they show that on screen? Why should we always scheme, rob, kill?" She recognized her stereotypical place in Hollywood which was to be either the "China Doll", "Dragon Lady", or nothing at all. This was the starting point to when Asian representation started heading in the wrong direction. It wasn't the fault of early Asian actors even though some criticized Anna May Wong for playing derogatory roles to which she said "she didn't write the characters, she only obeyed the directors' instructions." The beginning of the issue of wrongful depiction and representation was placing blame on the people rather than calling out the institution for their racist depictions, knowing now that they had the capabilities to build a great origin for good Asian representation. The filmography in these old films captured Asian setting and heritage beautifully but though they had the resources, they did not have the mindset and when they put these Asian actors on screen, they reduced them to demeaning roles that were only written for them. Stereotypical type-casting was the main block for actors like Anna May Wong who was the "oriental villainess" and Sessue Hayakawa who was America's villain and sex-symbol, when they tried to place a foothold in American cinema for proper Asian representation, but the racism they experienced unraveled to become blatantly clear when the Hay's Code was instituted in 1934.

The Hays code directly affected any chance in the 30's & 40's for fair Asian representation in film because it specifically barred interracial relationships, deeming the action "almost as inappropriate as bestiality." Thus, even though type-casting was a big issue for the representation of Asians and Asian culture at that time, the opportunities to fix that were severely diminished by this policy and the absence of the exposure to interracial couples set the tone for how romances on-screen "should look like" that still affect cinema today. Though there were attempts at testing the water like in *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933), which is notably considered "pre-code" but still seems scandalous in the ambiguous, forbidden love they are insinuating between the 2 races. In yellow-face, General Yen is the Chinese warlord who has kidnapped white woman Megan Davis and becomes attracted to her and continuously asks her to

join him for dinner. She is disgusted and refuses until one night she has an erotic dream where they are centimeters away from sharing an interracial kiss! Throughout the film she has essentially fallen in love with the general and it's interesting to observe the arch unfold but also notice that it will not finish; instead of being able to embrace each other, he kills himself because he is unable to bring himself to kill her. This is another example of the Asian-portrayed person not being able to win but another case of a very opportune set-up where it is in a beautiful Chinese temple with beautiful costumes that Megan actually ends up wearing, a chance to represent Asian culture nicely and humanize them by writing in a white woman actually being able to fall in love with an Asian man. But it is tragically squashed because according to societal standards, they should not be together. However I find it interesting that before the Hays code changed in 1968 (into the MPAA film rating system it is now), films solely based on interracial relationships still made it out and I believe they provided a start to proper Asian representation. *Japanese War Bride* (1952) showed the harsh treatment immigrant wives receive when white veterans come home with them after the war. Putting to light these struggles increased racial tolerance among the general public because it was a light call-out to the racism Americans acted with towards the Asian people; and placing this hurt woman, Tae, on screen garnered sympathy for her, seeing that this woman clearly acts with pure intentions and her husband goes far far lengths to protect her. That might be the most crucial part because it gives America an example of how they can act to reverse their racism and though Tae still does play a version of a "China Doll" character that is small, sweet, and submissive, it lessens the notion of the threat of Asian presence during a time of "yellow peril" and rather, paves the way for a more innocent avenue to portray and represent Asians in film. Conversely, in *Bridge to the Sun* (1961), it is based on a true story of a white woman who joins her Japanese diplomat husband in Japan and has to learn how to assimilate into Asian culture. She experiences racism in Japan and I think it was an important perspective to show because it very clearly is a representation of how countries treat immigrants regardless of where they come from and what country they're coming into. It also puts the audience into a place of intelligent authority where sometimes they are sitting in front of the screen and we're intended to have the attitude of "Of course you're not supposed to call out sexism in another Japanese man's home!" A film like this shows the culture & practices of other countries in a way where the audience subconsciously learns to understand the customs of another country while they get enveloped into this movie world that is actually the real world.

And seeing in both movies, the immigrant women are trying very hard to understand and assimilate, which is symbolic of their devotion to their husband and how much they really love him to be willing to go the lengths and compromise certain things for, emphasizes the trueness of the relationship. Therefore, as the audience watches their love unfold on screen, blind to race, the audience knows this is true love and I believe these 2 movies were great turns into subtly helping the American audience subconsciously start to root for and accept interracial love. Being at the mercy of the white American public, this opened the door again for better Asian representation through the portrayal of white people actually being able to fall in love with Asians and showing the more sensitive and raw sides to Asian people. Paths to better Asian representation were broadened through romance, which doesn't always escape stereotypes or racist depictions, but sometimes can stand in as the prevailing factor to override those negative aspects.

Movies involving Asian people and culture again, that were popular in the 60's, did surround romance but in analyzing a British romance and an American romance that were popular at the time, it can be observed that allowing for leniency of Asians on screen again hasn't fixed the issue of racism in films which evidently sets a bad standard for Asian representation in the coming ages. The popular romances were *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) and *Flower Drum Song* (1961), respectively. Firstly with *Flower Drum Song*, it was an American romance that didn't require a white character, but was completely racist. This movie had all the physical components for a respectful movie that highlighted Asian tradition with a beautiful set, costumes, an all-Asian main cast, and writing that worked in Asian familial tradition and a plot that was juicy with love, scandal, betrayal, and a continually emphasized illegal immigration story headed towards redemption; but the way it was produced, it proved that America wasn't ready to move on from the box that they forced Asians on screen to be. The main character Mei Li, was still a submissive "China Doll" that was displayed so shallow as she was tossed around and her heart broken without any fight for herself. Though she represented everything Americans wanted Chinese immigrants to be: a hard worker that very much loved and appreciated being in America and was obedient, they molded this character into a vision of the model minority that is fully based solely on stereotypical ideals. The other female character, that became a popular character type for Asian women to play during the time, was the sexualized performer (in other films, prostitutes) played by Nancy Kwan. This woman was sleazy and

trouble, lying and trying to seduce men and make them jealous. The list goes on with this cast and it is all to say that the film is full of stereotyped characters with no real depth and written to be no more than what the American audience assumes or wants of them. At face-value, I also initially thought this movie was a good introduction for the American public to see into Chinese tradition and culture and how family hierarchy worked, however, completely ignoring the fact that they made fun of Asians, ordering seahorse and octopus as well as calling them wetbacks. It wasn't until I took the American blinders off and realized that putting Asians on screen in an Asian setting was not enough to call it good Asian representation. Though it had the makings to be good for the image of Asians with its great color and imagery, just because it wasn't blatantly evil or murderous like past roles Asians had to play, doesn't mean it helped Asians look better to society; and this was the beginning of my understanding of needing to conjoin a *fair* plot with Asian features to call a film, one with positive Asian representation. The necessary components that can contribute to a film with good Asian representation is one with respectful content revolving Asian features, but can still be universally received as a good story and not one that must emphasize race and use stereotypes that become essential to the plot. *Flower Drum Song* fell short in that the plot could've been a good and engaging story that involved Asian tradition and setting, but was reliant on the stereotypical weak and conniving characters aimed to mock Asian culture, which is the cause of its disgrace to Asian representation in film history. However, *The World of Suzie Wong*, for its time, then becomes interesting because opposite to *Flower Drum Song*, though Suzie Wong is a prostitute played by Nancy Kwan as well, she is a very strong and complex character. According to these standards, *The World of Suzie Wong* stands a fair chance at being one with good Asian representation as it is a movie of a man, Robert, who befriends a prostitute for his artwork and ends up falling in love with her after the emotional turmoil that they put each other through. This film has an interesting plot with an arch, similar to *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* where two racially opposite people that were unlikely partners become mad for each other and in this movie, it is actually Suzie that holds some power. I think this movie works because Robert is not completely demeaning to Suzie, does not objectify her, and actually denies her request to sleep with her, but rather needs her and despite being a prostitute, she is loyal to him and even deeper, she is secretly a mother. She has a deep backstory as well, being forced into prostitution at a young age for survival and she is clever, coming up with plans to try to make Robert jealous. Therefore, this movie works in that

there is respect for Suzie as a complex character and when viewing the plot objectively, it is a twisty love story between a man and a prostitute that end up falling in love, which can universally be used by other races as well; ultimately meaning that Kwan did well and placed a foot-hold in good Asian representation by landing a role that is not racist-driven, but simply, she was chosen based on her talent to play a complex character. However, when that exact idea is looked at from another point of view, it falls short because the film cannot deny its reliance on the stereotypical presentation of Suzie as a prostitute and the misogyny that comes with it. It is difficult to argue that Suzie plays a negative stereotype when it can be claimed that she simply is accurately playing a prostitute who at the time did beg to sleep with men and talked in broken English because they really didn't know English. But I believe it was not good for Asian representation in the 60's because it fell back into the hole of type-casting and again placed an Asian woman in a role that was what the film industry always forced them to be in and thus, poses the danger of disrespecting the population of Asian women as a whole, being only seen in roles like this. And even with the grit Suzie had even as a prostitute, she still inevitably couldn't win and lost her child and had to rely on Robert. The movie was framed throughout that she needed Robert and as hard as she fought to be a mother and her own person, the one thing she was always seeking was his acceptance and love. Moreover, the fact that there are no positively represented Asian characters in the movie, only cheating clerks and desperate prostitutes that fawn over abuse, the movie does not progress the Asian image nor elevate their status. Therefore, more than promoting Asian strength, it further perpetuates the white male savior narrative and especially in the scene where he rips her "cheap European streetwalker" clothes off only to then confess his love, seemed more to me like a violent attempt, typical of emotional men at that time, to prove a point that was through his own hurt. However, in the name of love, the movie moved on to make it seem like it was a justified act but I think that is where this movie takes a negative turn; because from a feminist standpoint, it is an unnecessary way to assert power and physical dominance and excuse it as love, and from an Asian standpoint, it looks like he fell for an Asian woman and loved an Asian woman but in accordance with societal and racial standing he exercised every advantage to act like he had every right to be towering over her like that and she's supposed to love it as if that's an acceptable way to show love and confess vulnerability. Therefore, through romance, it seemed like popularity with the use of Asian people and culture became more frequent but the notion of nice Asian representation was once

again derailed and now continues to set the way for stereotypical portrayal of Asians in society and in film, further damaging Asian reputation.

If not romance, kung-fu and martial arts became a popular new Asian feature that started to get a lot of spotlight in film. This movement and introduction to the states is mostly credited to Bruce Lee and continued on by Jackie Chan, but how the image of Asian representation progressed during this era is not much better than that of the romance era. A notable movie of Bruce Lee is his role in *Enter the Dragon* (1973) which was a Hong Kong and America co-produced film. In this film you can see that Bruce Lee really stuck to the roots of what he learned in martial arts and watching the precision and calculated movement he acted with, it is evident that he has spent a lot of time perfecting his art and craft. Not only did it look cool but Lee had a way of making it feel authentic and with sprinkles of traditional values and backstory in the movie, there was a sense of realness and legitimacy to the art that was put on screen. While this may have fooled the American audience into feeling like they were finally part of a true "oriental" experience, to myself and others, it felt like it was just a continuation of another romanticized stereotype to what Asian men will now be boxed in to be and did not push the emotional boundaries of any past Asian stereotyped male characters. While Bruce Lee did break barriers and "kick down doors" in that he did bring true Asian value on screen with his craft, his characters, especially the one in *Enter the Dragon*, still lacked the depth of anything more than a screaming fighter and with at least a total of 30 minutes of just straight fighting in this movie, Lee is playing a character that does not hold much of a drive nor purpose other than to fight and is basically only glorified for fighting. This is demeaning for the male Asian image because the new stereotype that Asian actors will play lack the characteristics of the bare minimum of what a white male lead would have: a goal, a love interest, and a purpose. It's interesting because it is a Hong Kong co-produced film so in theory, this should be good for Asian representation as that is probably the reason for its authenticity and can be used as a tool to provide a lens into Asian culture and artform; but there is only a minimal scope to the entire race shown with kung fu and beyond that, more of it just isn't present in the film so the repetition of just kung fu and screaming at times just become silly, which holds the potential of devaluing the male Asian image as well. Being that it was so popular among the American audience is a sign of the times though, as if to say that this was the limit to Hong Kong content the American public was ready to receive. Then Jackie Chan entered into this box and also solidified this mold. One of his

famous movies was *Rumble in the Bronx* (1995) and though it came out close to 20 years after *Enter the Dragon* and is fully Hong Kong produced, I believe it arguably got worse because it wasn't just one Asian man that was a bit ridiculous and over-the-top, but now we have multiple Asian people being stereotyped in the most blatant way; and it is worse because it is an Asian production perpetuating that stereotype but it does say a lot that it does well in the American market. The *Rumble in the Bronx* film featured a Hong Kong cop (Jackie Chan) that has come into America to visit and befriends an Asian woman, Elaine, and also later becomes attracted to another Asian woman, Nancy. But these 2 women represent the 2 most overused and unappealing modern stereotypes an Asian woman can play and they are: the one with the short haircut and nerdy appeal to seem like the tom-boyish side friend (Elaine) and the other, a sexy, clueless woman only ever dressed in revealing clothing and does not represent any sort of fierceness but is just a product of men's fetish for Asian women on screen. I will say that in this movie, Jackie Chan displays more depth and emotional attachment to things than Bruce Lee did and so it can be said that he has elevated the status for the stereotyped kung fu Asian man, but when placed in an entirely American produced movie like *Rush Hour* (1998), it can also be said that that was just his entrance into fully setting the stage for the white-washed version of this stereotype. In *Rush Hour*, Jackie Chan plays the reserved Asian detective who truly does have a mission to find the diplomat's daughter to whom he's very close with. Giving his character more depth past the stereotype of the Asian man that only knows kung fu, this could set the stage for good Asian representation to have his artform respected and desired. But it wasn't treated as such and though I understand that this is supposed to be a comedy, it seems like how Hollywood views and plans to use this stereotype became very clear and exemplified as co-star "Agent Carter" continuously throughout the movie makes fun of him by calling him different names, mistaking him for another Asian guy as to say "all Asians look the same", and mocks his accent. Therefore in these 25 years of film, it can be seen that this era becomes the point of when America has honed in on the male Asian stereotypes it enjoys seeing, wants to keep, and will continue to use and type-cast with with future films like *Karate Kid* and more. All 3 of these movies have placed a valuable emphasis on the presence and importance of kung fu in film, but lack the marks of good Asian representation because it is not shown in a particularly positive nor respectful light with a plot line that is always at the expense of the man's image. And thus, this is

the type of banter that has become the blueprint for many other male Asian stereotypes for the future of cinema and society is not kinder in creating female Asian stereotypes as well.

Conversely, it is women who face the brunt of a lot of offensive stereotypes in Hollywood that are most important to point out. Asian women have mainly been minimized to the stereotyped roles where they either are fetishized or sexualized— most times into the role of the prostitute— (*The World of Suzie Wong*, *Flower Drum Song*), or are smart, boy-ish characters (Elaine from *Rumble in the Bronx*), or are the really dumb, scandalous mistresses (Nancy from *Rumble in the Bronx*), or could be depicted as the small, frail, gentle flowers (*Flower Drum Song*, *Japanese War Bride*), or on the opposite side of the spectrum, the fierce Asian mystique (*Shanghai Express*) or warrior (*Mulan*). And these stereotypes are not just misogynistic, boxed-in, female stereotypes, but for women, the majority of offensive stereotypes that exist, such as these, are mainly aimed just for Asian women and no other race holds this much variety in the types of characters Asian women can categorize as. Therefore, with so many options, it creates the illusion of more opportunity to showcase Asian women and all their different sides but the truth is that it is the American manipulation of which Asian qualities are deemed appropriate to put on screen that creates a false perception of what all Asian women are claimed to be like, since there is so much variety. Ironically, it is designed to feel like Asian women have had many chances to let the world know how they really want to be portrayed yet they realistically don't have many chances at all unless they are written specifically for them, which you know is actually made specifically for them because how they are interacted with in the film, is reliant on mentioning or pointing out their race. This is true for many many movies that Asians have starred in because it has rarely been so that an Asian person, most definitely an Asian woman, can step on screen without at one point, involving her race, which is the pattern that is heavily used in the fetishization of Asian women. White women in movies don't typically get fetishized based on their race because there is so much representation all over the film industry from main characters to side characters to extras, people don't need to notice their race when they are put on screen because they are the normalized public in film. So it is easy to tell how they differ when the movie wants us to notice that they are different and it is easy to articulate the desirable quality that you're supposed to notice in this white woman because we've been exposed to so many genres of white women throughout film history. But with Asian women, the exoticism of their presence is automatically enough to be noticed and that is simply

enough to be the different and desirable factor. When Lucy Liu is used on a mission in *Charlie's Angels* (2000), she is sent to impersonate a masseuse at "Madam Wong's House of Blossoms" in order to lure the bad guy in. This is a prime example of how they used Liu's oriental uniqueness as the basis of her attractiveness (and reason to be sent in) and that when Asians are on screen, especially Asian women, they are only placed in to fit the Asian role that's stereotypically written and designed so that they cannot "blend in" but will exist as a product of what their race will offer to the movie. Existence being the mechanism used to bring Asian women attention proves the point that only due to the limited exposure of Asian women in film can this happen because correct Asian representation is harmed by the lack of representation at all on screen to normalize that they can also exist in the normalized public. This becomes a brutal cycle of "Asian women can't be represented correctly because they are not present enough as normal people separate from their stereotypes" but then also "Asian women don't appear on screen nor seem to fit and be understood unless they are their stereotype" which off-tracks any progress towards more accurate, sustainable, and kind Asian representation. This generates a "token Asian" mentality through the film industry and it is not something Asians are supposed to appreciate because it does not equate to true Asian representation.

However, when taken out of the "token Asian" idealism, we progress to movies where they instead involve exclusively all-Asian casts. You leave the era of where Asians are discriminated against by putting them side-by-side with white people; however, we have not raised the bar too high when the new perceived notion of "good" representation is simply the presence of Asians without paying more actual attention to the story and the way they cast and represent Asians. One dramatic and one comedic example of this new wave of representation not completely gone wrong but not completely gone right, are *Joy Luck Club* (1993) and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). *Joy Luck Club* is a movie about the gap and disconnect between immigrant mothers and their Asian American daughters, told through stories of generational trauma that gets passed on. It is one of the first movies to touch on the Asian American experience and it is told from the 4 different backstories of 4 separate mother-daughter pairs. However, it sadly missed its shot at forwarding Asian representation in film. At first, it was a revolutionary film, enthusiastically received by many and receiving a 90% on *Rotten Tomatoes* due to its bravery in telling these difficult Chinese pasts and giving Asian American families a chance at being able to see themselves on screen. But it gradually began to be scrutinized because the Asian American

society started to set higher standards for themselves and how they wanted to be portrayed on screen. While *Joy Luck Club* did highlight important and difficult history, it was told in an extremely melodramatic way that unfortunately was also founded mostly on stereotypes. This film adaptation of Amy Tan's book was produced in a form that was very much surrounded by culture and rich experiences, but created a world that romanticized and exoticized the struggle that some of these stories are based off of and perpetuated a tragic narrative that was not very realistic. I believe, more than showing off Asian power and giving raw and authentic history screentime, it went too far and failed to actually portray authentic reactions to these traumas and in turn, automatically succumbed to creating weak daughter characters that were the stereotype of always feeling like a disappointment to their mother, oblivious to how hard those mothers worked, rather than being real people that really tried understanding. *Crazy Rich Asians* seem to also go down the same path. However, it is more difficult to analyze this film because when things become comedy, it's harder to discern what is intentional satire and what is just plain offensive. The movie, like *Joy Luck Club*, is full of stereotypes and definitely founded on the silliest and sneakiest ones. Ones of the fast-traveling network of gossip, disapproving mothers in all circumstances, the absolutely ignorant Asian American to any traditional values, the magazine cover parents that always need to save face, the evil women that sabotage other women out of jealousy, and the list goes on. I think that at first it was received by the Asian community very fondly because it was another film, in a long time, with a fully Asian cast and they represented traits that the audience was familiar with and connected to. While it is always so important to see yourself represented on screen and Asians are able to laugh at it because sometimes these stereotypes are true; the question then never goes, but needs to go, so far as to be turned to themselves in asking "Would I want to be seen like that?" though. Again, the American audience, and in this case the Asian American audience especially, has fallen into the Hollywood trap that because there are many Asians on screen, it is our big break and we are finally seeing proper Asian representation. However, it doesn't prove that point but moreover emphasizes the depravity of the Asian presence on screen if Asians are proud to see themselves in this offensive light. Given, being a comedy, this becomes a very thin line to walk because some Asian viewers will see this as satire as they see their funny conflicts amongst themselves play out on screen, but the way the story plays out in this film, it is very obviously exaggerated for the screen and the key part is that there isn't much redemption from these stereotyped

personalities. This movie still remains one of my favorite rom-coms ever as a young Asian woman who sees bits and pieces of my family drama embedded in this movie and can appreciate the culture and reality of relationships knitted in the dialogue but even so, there seems to lack a certain amount of maturity among all the characters and the small fragment of redemption from this larger than life story at the end, is very slight. Thus, in terms of representation, I cannot dispute the fact that this film meets a form of conformity to what the white American audience perceives of Asian people, like to laugh at about Asian people, and will continue to see Asian people as. Both these films, in their pursuit of painfully raw Asian authenticity, tried to emphasize too much, the Asian life and unintentionally swung past the boundary of respectful representation. But alas, it paved the way to breakthrough films that, I believe, finally got it right.

In 2019 we were given *The Farewell* starring Awkwafina and in 2022 we were blessed with *Everything Everywhere All At Once* starring Michelle Yeoh, Ke Huy Quan, and Stephanie Hsu. *The Farewell* embodies what Asian representation on screen should look like because it takes a plot that is founded on Asian values and a real Asian family's experience and utilizes the trueness to authentically unravel a beautiful story. And the main girl, Billi, that Awkwafina plays, is not like other Asian American daughters that are clumsy with tradition and angrily defiant to being in agreement with their mother but instead, is a stubborn daughter that does not agree with tradition nor her mother, but obeys. I don't think stereotypes are as blatantly at play here firstly because Awkwafina provides so much more depth than the normal rebellious daughter and her older aged character is written so that she is smarter, which is helpful both in knowing how to explain what she wants and knowing when to pull back according to respectful Asian values. Then, unlike other stereotypes, her mother is truly devastated in trying to leverage with her daughter as well, providing a true visual of an immigrant mother who does not know how to explain to her daughter why these values make sense and imitates the struggle of navigating this relationship rather than just being the cold tiger mom. Their dynamic represents a more authentic visual of the disconnect between traditional Asian culture and "self-centered" American values that is usually disputed and could be an argument real families can still see themselves in currently; and moreso, this movie doesn't find the need to use stereotypes in order to explain the reason the family functions this way. The film is great for Asian representation because it doesn't try to prove that it is Asian and I find that when the production is not trying so

hard, it becomes a richer, more appreciative experience and is also actually better understood by non-Asian audiences. When the film isn't trying so hard to emphasize its "Asianness" and it is noticeably and effortlessly authentic, there comes an understanding that while this can seem like an "Asian film" due to its setting, you still know that these scenarios and emotions are ones that anyone can empathize with; therefore it can still be universally appreciated and received as simply a great, deep plot about a lost granddaughter caught between family and self values trying to figure out how to do right by her grandmother. When it can be felt and touching universally, it no longer is an "Asian movie" just because it revolves around that setting, but has reached the sweet spot in becoming just a movie that has positive Asian representation that anybody can see themselves in, which I believe is the purpose of story-telling on screen and the most important aspect of representation for any race. *Everything Everywhere All At Once* is a film that has adjusted to this standard of film-making as well towards positive Asian representation and gone beyond too! This movie showcases an Asian woman, played by Michelle Yeoh, and her struggles in her marriage with Ke Huy Quan's character (that they both won the Golden Globes and Academy Awards for!), which is a taboo topic, as well as lesbian relationships and a large reference to mental health struggles. All of which are taboo in the Asian community but on top of that, it is a sci-fi movie! This film is groundbreaking because it has given an Asian family an opportunity to be part of something that is plainly cool. It's not "oriental", nor particularly woke focusing on race troubles, nor racist. It is firstly, an abstract sci-fi movie that isn't founded on their Asianness nor does it rely on those qualities to make up the basis of the story, but has simply put an Asian actress in a role that accentuates all of her capabilities and allows her to be just a normal actress playing a fun character. Then, the more brilliant part about it is that the creators have found a way to marry cool with deep heartbreak. This film encapsulates the difficult, trying, and sometimes toxic relationship among mothers and daughters and tackles so many controversial topics, all to emphasize the beauty in the stillness and simplicity of life, yet all the while still jumping universes! That aspect of using a geeky concept of multi-universes to symbolize all of our doubts, lost dreams, and what ifs only to tell you that you only need to be right where you are is beautiful but more importantly, there is something in this movie for all demographics of people struggling with everything (everywhere, all at once). Now with a film that can touch everybody, it then becomes good for Asian representation even more so because they humanize and use an Asian family to tell this revolutionary and heartfelt story and message

to the people. There are traditional Asian trimmings added as a layer on top of the sci-fi-ness that is highlighted in the story within the family. Michelle Yeoh speaks "Chinglish" in the movie and can be argued to play some version of the stereotypical, harsh mother; but she plays it in a way that doesn't betray the Asian image and her arch throughout the movie displays her break away from the stereotype whereas other movies have complacently painted Asian mothers as that tough mama bear by default. Yeoh debuts a different, softer, and earnest side to the mother that is also trying just as hard as her daughter to understand each other and connect; and thus, this movie then essentially does a good job in finding a balance in using Asian dynamics enough to be recognized by the Asian community as a felt sense of representation, while also being enjoyable for all other races that either appreciate a good multi-verse plot and/or is sappy for mother/daughter duos. It's really special that the creators used an Asian family to portray this epic story but that they load on the heavier issues in Asian American culture as well. Respect from American society and acceptance is universal among all races but this film was unafraid to bust open the doors of the unspoken issues between immigrant elders and young Asian Americans too. Growing up in this part of the world and trying to find your identity in so many things, I appreciate that this movie serves all but for those that they know will get it, there is a greater tribute to the Asian American community in letting them know their race-specific anxieties are heard too. This film, therefore, is the answer for beautifully done Asian representation. It is universally inclusive because it goes beyond tackling issues between Asian relationships by sprinkling in LGBTQ acceptance and mental health obstacles between generations with the purpose of reaching society in a talented and precise way; but becomes a model example for true Asian representation through its achievement in uplifting and redeeming these once-stereotyped characters, artistically painting the image for us of a healing Asian American home and grazing a positive light on them to still be felt and understood by all.

The future for Asian representation in film looks bright. From humble beginnings, through many challenges, the cards Asians were dealt at the start of film history were ones of harsh restrictions and unflattering portrayals. Yet, as Michelle Yeoh said in her latest Golden Globes award acceptance speech, it was on these shoulders that fair Asian representation has been able to improve and flourish. Through many rounds of trials and errors, the formula is now more clear for future filmmakers to be equipped to better highlight Asian culture and uplift the abilities of Asian actors and actresses.

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