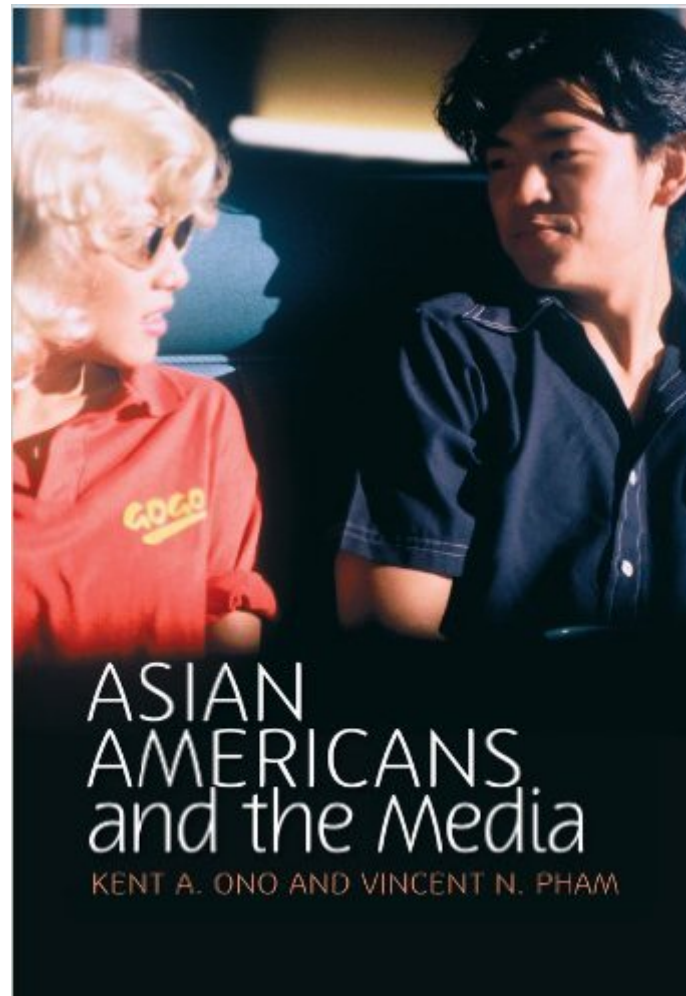


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# Asian Americans And The Media



## Synopsis

*Asian Americans and the Media* provides a concise, thoughtful, critical and cultural studies analysis of U.S. media representations of Asian Americans. The book also explores ways Asian Americans have resisted, responded to, and conceptualized the terrain of challenge and resistance to those representations, often through their own media productions. In this engaging and accessible book, Ono and Pham summarize key scholarship on Asian American media, as well as lay theoretical groundwork to help students, scholars and other interested readers understand historical and contemporary media representations of Asian Americans in traditional media, including print, film, music, radio, and television, as well as in newer media, primarily internet-situated. Since Asian Americans had little control over their representation in early U.S. media, historically dominant white society largely constructed Asian American media representations. In this context, the book draws attention to recurring patterns in media representation, as well as responses by Asian America. Today, Asian Americans are creating complex, sophisticated, and imaginative self-portraits within U.S. media, often equipped with powerful information and education about Asian Americans. Throughout, the book suggests media representations are best understood within historical, cultural, political, and social contexts, and envisions an even more active role in media for Asian Americans in the future. *Asian Americans and the Media* will be an ideal text for all students taking courses on Asian American Studies, Minorities and the Media and Race and Ethnic Studies.

## Book Information

Paperback: 216 pages

Publisher: Polity; 1 edition (December 22, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0745642748

ISBN-13: 978-0745642741

Product Dimensions: 6.8 x 0.7 x 9.7 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (5 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #349,700 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #191 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Specific Demographics > Asian American Studies](#) #1338 in [Books > History > Americas > United States > African Americans > Discrimination & Racism](#) #1439 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Sociology > Race Relations](#)

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No Azns, preez:

a discourse on the absence of leading roles in Hollywood films for Asian Americans

"Wow," I say, upon reading page 51 of Asian Americans and the Media by Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham. "Did you know that Asian actors could barely play their own race in Hollywood for most of the 20th century? Most of the roles for Asians have been played by Whites or anyone else but Asians." "Well, that's because there haven't been many prominent Asian [American] actors in the industry." My boyfriend is quick to reply. "No," I respond, "that's just what [we] don't see; doesn't mean they're not there." He then uses the economics of demand and supply to support his argument, stating it as a matter of fact: if there were more bankable Asian and Asian American (AAA) actors, logically, we would be seeing more of them. I try to explain that it may have to do with economics, but socio-political culture has more relevance to it. "For instance," I say. "You know The King and I (1956)?" "Yeah," he says, "Yul Brynner, right?" "Is not Asian. Much less Thai, and yet he's cast as King Mongkut." "But Yul Brynner is a good actor though. Not only did he do a great job at playing the King, his facial structures are unique enough that he looks ethnically ambiguous." He looks back at his laptop. I look at my boyfriend. The way his argument is going seems to explain the very reason why we do not know many "prominent" AAA actors with leadings roles in Hollywood films: The dynamics of both explicit and implicit yellowface logics keep AAA actors in typecast roles in line with the constructed images of the Oriental Asian and the Model Minority.

YELLOWFACE MIMICRY

Over the years, I have seen bad kung fu movies where white men attempt to pass off as Chinese men with taped eyes and bad Chinese accent. I used to wonder why someone would subject themselves to a position that would bring upon ridicule from people who know the subject at hand better than they do. Then again, these 'Chinese' white men often played the role of someone of high status in society like a Chinese official. Sometimes it felt as if they should be praised for trying to speak in a foreign language at all. While in those cases, they usually are found in the mass of Chinese people, in Breakfast at Tiffany's (1961), Mr. Yunioshi-who is played by Mickey Rooney-is found in a mass of white people. He is portrayed as "inept, buck-toothed, puffy cheeked, and sexually depraved" (Ono and Pham 48). Little did I know, this contrast of racial portrayal is exemplary of the explicit yellowface logic. Ono and Pham defines yellowface "as when a non-Asian or Asian American plays the role of an Asian or Asian American"; explicitly, this means that white human faces are made-up to look 'Asian'-with exaggerated black-lined, taped Almond-shaped eyes, wigs, and acting in "an obsequious

manner"-and sound vaguely Asian or speak infantile-like broken English (46). I try to imagine what it would have been like if a Japanese actor played Mr. Yunioshi and I realize that he would not produce the same comic effect as someone of a different, foreign race (i.e. a white person) would. Surprisingly, it is not the white actor who takes the hit of ridicule here but the image he attempts to represent-the Japanese race. This is an important epiphany, because it relates to how "current practices of yellowface...blur Asian American identity and deploy cultural essentialism to view [AAA] people as "All Seem Identical, Alike, No different" (ASIAN). Writing scripts that assume "biological and phenotypical commonalities" in AAA people renders their life experiences banal and insignificant. This also reproduces "institutional and structural processes of disempowerment and disenfranchisement", continuing the "Orientalization and the foreignization of [AAA people]" (Ono and Pham 55). Moreover, it is the Western framework that first conceived the ideology of Orientalism "without input by the East" to define the position of the East in their relationship of power: "Europe is powerful and articulate; Asia is defeated and distant" (Ono and Pham 43-4). Originally made for "the pleasure of white audiences" by encouraging the "consumer's suspension of disbelief", yellowface focuses on the humane relation between white people than with their Asian counterparts; those who believed in its caricatures "became imprisoned in a world of racial caricatures and power relations" (Ono and Pham 47). This has a lot to do with the so-called yellow peril discourse-the idea that Asian people are going to take over the [Western] world. By racializing their own xenophobia, the West assumes the White Man's burden to globally distribute public service announcements of their representations of the East (Ono and Pham 28). Ono and Pham summarizes the fate of AAA actors before the 21st century: In part because of racism and specific racist and xenophobic policies against miscegenation, [AAA] actors could not even play genuine character parts in early media culture. [AAA actors] were not ordinarily given jobs in Hollywood, and [AAA] characters were scarce. When such characters did exist, a convention of yellowface ensured that they were played primarily by whites...Yellowface logics...help support and maintain a condition of unequal power relations between whites and [AAA people]. Whereas whites, blacks, and others have played Asian characters, Asian Americans, for the most part, have not been accorded such masquerading 'privileges' (45-6). Since Hollywood is populated mainly by European white actors, they act as the primary gatekeepers of the films produced, thus affecting the employment of AAA actors in leading roles. There are various examples of AAA actors being denied genuine characters of their races. In *The King and I*, AAA actors mostly played background roles like "the secondary wives of the King and the King's children", a casting that implies "the gendered and infantilizing ways in which [AAA people] take a back seat to whites and Latinos". Even the iconic Bruce Lee

could not act in the lead role of Kung Fu (1972-1975), the very TV program he helped create, "because he 'looked 'too Asian'". The character was written to be "half American and half Chinese" so that it was easier to portray his White substitute David Carradine as "heroic" (Ono and Pham 51). For All-American Girl (1994-1995), a show based loosely on Margaret Cho's life, the "[p]roducers hired an acting coach to help her act more authentically Asian" (Ono and Pham 56). As an Asian myself, I can imagine few things to be more insulting than that. Honoring one's cultural background is a value especially venerated in the Asian culture. No wonder there is a lack of actors of Asian heritage fighting for their rights to be or to remain in Hollywood. Some people may say that having non-AAA people play AAA roles "at least provides some level of inclusion" in the film narrative (Ono and Pham 53). My boyfriend also tells me I should take such interest of the other races as a compliment instead of an insult. But what these critics of the yellowface logic do not seem to realize is that it "authorizes racist and degrading representations to be played for comedic effect" (Ono and Pham 53). It further implies that this is what AAA actors need to comply with in order to be successful in Hollywood (Ono and Pham 61). Having white actors in [AAA] roles may also imply the assumption that audiences "prefer" white actors. According to The Slanted Screen (2006), a revised script of The O.C. (2003) cancelled out non-white races from cool-kid roles. As positive role models, survey shows that American youths expect to see White people in positive roles whereas African Americans and Latino/as in limited roles like the maid or the janitor roles. They did not expect to see an Asian cast at all. ("The Slanted Screen")

### YELLOWFACE GOES INVISIBLE

The denial of Bruce Lee as the lead actor of his own show and the denial of Margaret Cho's authentic portrayal of herself are prime examples of implicit yellowface. Implicit yellowface influences the ideas of what makes AAA people 'authentically' Asian. According to Ono and Pham, "[l]ike explicit yellowface, implicit yellowface involves both stage and social actors looking, sounding, and acting according to some notion of normativized, authentic standard of Asianness". With the spotlight on "directed Oriental affections", the acting skills of AAA actors reduce in meaning. It "downplay[s] their own existential identities and experiences", even more so when they are playing what seems like an arbitrary role that belongs to "ethnic groups other than those they themselves know most intimately". While white actors do "play non-white ethnic roles", they do not get a "racial expectation" like ASIAN that results in the implicit yellowface logic (54). Ultimately, the yellowface logics limits the diversity of roles AAA actors can take on successfully. This often pose a dilemma for mixed-race Asian American actors as they are often stuck with monoracial roles. As Ono and Pham write, "[i]t is extremely rare for...dominant media generally, to create a role for a mixed-race Asian American character" (55). Taking advantage of the "fudge factor" according to yellowface

logics, Hollywood scripts bank in on the economical and political efficiency of "racial and ethnic ambiguity" (Ono and Pham 57). With the constant reproduction of stereotypical variants of Dr. Fu Manchu, Madame Butterfly, Dragon Lady, and Lotus Blossom, AAA actors are restricted from leading roles in Hollywood films. This underrepresentation of positive role models of their kind on-screen is disheartening and disempowering for the Asian communities. Although Bruce Lee broke the emasculating stereotypes by creating leading roles for actors who can fight well, actors like him are "the exceptions, not the rule" ("The Slanted Screen"). Ironically, Bruce Lee's cinematic success brought upon the stereotype that all Asians know kung fu, creating yet another limitation for AAA actors.

**CHANGE OF THE MILLENNIUM** In the recent years, we can see a slow but steady change. The Slanted Screen claims that after years of playing the stereotype, Asian Americans are finally entering the mainstream as "truthful portrayals are finally beginning to emerge". Films like *A Great Wall* (1986), *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1989), *Catfish in Black Bean Sauce* (1999), *Charlotte Sometimes* (2002), *Torque* (2004), as well as TV shows like *21 Jump Street*, *Heroes* and *Lost* all have shown AAA actors and stories in leading roles and promising light. The National Asian American Telecommunications Association (NAATA) is cited to help to protect and ensure eligible the AAA actors' right to prominence in Hollywood ("The Slanted Screen"). However, this documentary may be overly optimistic. I am not sure how much things are really changing with a movie like *Fu Manchu* (2011) in the making ["Internet Movie Database (IMDb)"]. Statistics of "prime-time APIA regulars" suggest that even mainstream television is reluctant to represent Asian Americans, as much as most mainstream media would. (Ono and Pham 94-5). Moreover, the media [still] portrays Asianness generally as synonymous with being non-American. Many AAA actors are limited to action roles, often as villains; during the production of *The Replacement Killers* (1998), the producers were uncomfortable with Asian men portrayed as the heroes while the White men as the villains, so the villains became Asian men. In *Romeo Must Die* (2000), the producers cut the scene of Jet Li kissing Aaliyah ("The Slanted Screen"). This clearly shows how the urban audience is still disapproving of Asian males in strong romantic leading roles. Outside the action film genre, in relation with the Model Minority myth, AAA actors are limited to two extreme types of character. They may either play the role of Charlie Chan, "someone successful even as he is dis-empowered" (Ono and Pham 82) or the role of the successful but less humane one, as found in medical roles today. Portrayed as machine-like "rote learners" who work for the "modernist, capitalist, industrial society...the role of the doctor can double, ambivalently, for the villainous yellow peril image of yesteryear. In other words, by overrepresenting Asian Americans as doctors while underrepresenting them overall, the media evoke anxiety about a potential Asian 'takeover' of yet

another set of US jobs. It is clear that roles are still incredibly limited for Asian Americans, that single-occupational typecasting significantly restricts possible jobs for [AAA] actors, and that limiting actors to such roles radically reduces the ability to represent [AAA people] as diverse human beings" (Ono and Pham 86) We can also explain the lack of leading roles for AAA actors by drawing parallels with the realm of US education. Parents are taking their children out of public schools and universities they feel are "overpopulated" by Asian students, regardless of whether they are first-generation Asian Americans or not. While 'white flight' used to refer to how whites moved from the inner cities to the suburbs to escape the 'overrun' of mainly African Americans, now 'white flight' "refers to white families leaving top-notch academically superb high schools because of the influx of highly competitive, educationally superior Asians". Again, Asian Americans are "overrepresented" and are "taking over" the white country of America. Yet again, being successful at what one does here is accused of having the modus operandi to take over the world-a rehash of the yellow peril discourse. (Ono and Pham 60-94)

**CONCLUSION** History shows us that the dominant media is comprised of the works of "those with little first-hand knowledge of the Asian American experience" (Ono and Pham 6). Following the yellowface logics, we saw that AAA actors "were excluded from working in Hollywood while simultaneously being mocked and made fun of in a form of racial masquerade" (Ono and Pham 61). This "assumed power differential" can be changed by the AAA people, as it relies on "popular consumption" of the masses (Ono and Pham 59). In spite of the hyperbolized xenophobia, "US Americans demonstrated enough...curiosity...about [the AAA people] to construct a complex representational edifice to include them visually and narratively but to exclude them physically" (Ono and Pham 50). Ideally, as far as Hollywood is concerned, it should create more non-racial-specific roles, not just for actors of Asian descent. To stir real change, it may be wiser for the AAA people to focus less on getting the leading roles and more on being part of the decision-making process-that is, to take on the roles of directors, producers, writers, executives, and performers-for it is the writing and directing that starts the form of the story. Like Tzi Ma, of Dante's Peak (1997) fame says, "you have to look not for a specifically Asian American role but an acting role." ("The Slanted Screen").....

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If you live in an environment without much exposure to Asians then how do you view Asian American culture? If television and film is your only contact, then this book may need to be required reading. The exploration of how Asians are portrayed in American media is both terrible and enlightening, which you may not realize until you start reading this book!

For some reason I found the writing style unclear. Like they didn't prove a point before running off to the next one. In a way, it is as if they didn't feel they needed to prove the point but just accept it as fact. They explain it but then do not connect it to important theorists in the field of Ethnic Studies etc so it doesn't have a grounding in a way which doesn't give the reader a sense of completeness and trust with the statements. This is good as an overview of the themes and is in depth about yellow peril and yellow face and other key concepts and terms. But it is not as enjoyable and straightforward as *America on Film* by Bernshoff etc all, which is better for a good overview of not only Asians/Asian Amers but other ethnicities, and gender and class as well. So if you want an overview go for *America on Film*. If you want to more in-depth go for this book... and if you have to read it for a class, then you are stuck with this book!

I bought this for one of my classes. Our teacher had a read it but to me it was extremely dull and boring. The topic about it was intriguing but reading it was just not for me. Others might find it a good read though.

I've read this book and borrowed from a library but wanted to have a physical copy of my own. I'm really happy to have a copy of this book.

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