

A staple of my late childhood entertainment, the film *The Joy Luck Club* heavily shaped my view as I was growing up of race relations between white Americans and Asians, both American-born and immigrants. It was a movie that my mother encouraged me to watch, as it was one of the only contemporary examples of popular media where Asians took center stage and did not exist solely as the butt of a racially charged joke, or to conveniently inject a little exoticism into an otherwise bland atmosphere. It was a story that directly mirrored the relationship my mother and I shared: she and my father emigrated Stateside in the 1970s, and I was a second-generation Korean-American born in New York City. Language and cultural concerns grew, not lessened, as I grew up, and the rift between my mother's ideologies and my own rapidly developing worldview became more noticeable.

In many ways, director Wayne Wang's 1993 adaptation of Amy Tan's novel still remains a significant cultural artifact. I say this because in the nearly two decades that have passed since the making of this movie, there has been a quite scanty number of cogently made books, movies or television shows with a wide release produced about the Asian experience in America. Of course, certain aspects of the plot seem a little hackneyed or dated now in the 21<sup>st</sup> c., and a few key points about the way this movie was written, cast, produced and distributed still stick in my throat. Under the guise of being a progressive, forward-thinking film about Asian-Americans, there are still multiple

issues that plague this work: why do all the second-generation women conform to a Western beauty standard? Why do they completely and without question play into the myth of the subservient and delicate plaything, while doing virtually nothing to subvert the stereotype? Why are the majority of Chinese men in this film villainized or portrayed as absolutely ineffectual and weak? And although it was groundbreaking at the time to cast a full ensemble of Asian actors, why were they cast from a complete hodgepodge of ethnicities?

I'd like to take this perennial favorite from my childhood and cast a more critical eye upon it, using the framework of postcolonial criticism to better understand the tropes and plot devices at play in this work. Although the characters in *The Joy Luck Club* largely seem to exist in an idealized dramatic race-less bubble where the very worst possible occurrence might be a domestic disturbance between a mother and child during a lavish, warmth-filled dinner party, a closer look shows that there are interesting dynamics established between the white and Asian characters, as well as obvious lasting effects of the Second World War and Chinese feudalism.

I find that ultimately this film is geared towards a white American audience, and as a result fails to make any significant headway in terms of destroying harmful stereotypes. According to author and critic Frank Chin, *The Joy Luck Club* falls squarely into the realm of “fake” fiction, by reinforcing the ideas that Asia is the land of the mystical, populated by lovely soft-spoken females and fiercely misogynistic and desexualized males. Referring to Tan's novel as well as works by Asian-American writers Maxine Hong Kingston and David Henry Hwang, Chin writes “[t]hese works are held up before us as icons of our pride, symbols of our freedom from the icky-gooey evil of a Chinese culture where the written word for 'woman' and 'slave' are the same word.” Of Tan's opening lines in *The Joy Luck Club*, wherein which she describes a fairy tale about a duck that wishes to be a swan, Chin finds that “[t]he fairy tale is not Chinese but white racist. It is not informed by any Chinese intelligence. This is Confucian culture as seen through the interchangeable Chinese/Japanese/Korean/Vietnamese mix

(depending on which is the yellow enemy of the moment) of Hollywood<sup>1</sup>.”

Postcolonialism is not simply the study of all that came chronologically after the European colonizations of Asian, African and American lands. It encompasses much more than that, and in the contemporary cultural atmosphere of America, it seems that definitions of race relations become more nebulous and hard to pinpoint, making it difficult to speak of a single isolated cultural influence upon another. For instance, it would be wrong of us to only consider Asian identity as a passive element, being acted upon by the white American influence, without “giving back.” In fact, as portrayed in *The Joy Luck Club*, the forces of the Chinese-born émigré and Eastern philosophies/politics/religions collide not only with the juggernaut of white American culture, but also with its own progeny—the Asian-American child that is Eastern in appearance yet has thoroughly been indoctrinated into Western thought by his or her peers, instructors, and popular media. There is a constant give-and-take in both the film and the original text where the mothers, the daughters, the white characters, and the characters that live and stay in China, constantly redefine each others' notions of self and what is acceptable or “good.”

I find that at heart postcolonial studies is the study of identities—what is considered “normal” and what is considered “foreign”—racially, ethnically, culturally—and whatever resultant hybrid identities begin to emerge as Western ideologies are imposed on non-Western cultures. The study becomes even more interesting in the case of immigrants, when the imposed-upon non-white has been transplanted into the Western realm, causing a sort of double identity shift.

Postcolonial writer Edward Said redefined “Orientalism,” a term used to describe Eastern motifs

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Chin, “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake,” *A Companion to Asian American Studies* (ed. Kent A. Ono). Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. 134.

in arts, to describe a split binary between the Eastern and Western worlds that is artificially constructed in an attempt by the Western world to define itself in terms of *what it is not* (here, the Orient refers not only to the Far East that we're discussing in terms of *The Joy Luck Club*, but places such as Northern Africa and Western Asia). Said suggests that Westerners create and reestablish their notion of themselves and the Occident by using a blanket definition of the "East" as a generic Other. It is everything sinful, unfamiliar, despicable, fearsome, worrying, hard-to-understand<sup>2</sup>. So it is interesting to see a novel penned by a racially Asian author, as interpreted by a racially Asian filmmaker, resulting in a movie that so thoroughly embodies culturally white aesthetics.

The difference in portrayal of men and women in this film is markedly consistent from start to finish. Every young female protagonist (the four daughters and four mothers in their youth) as well as most other female bit players embody the same characteristics—they are light-skinned, porcelain-complected, soft-spoken, clever yet demure, small in frame, and either good lovers or good mothers or both. They are all immaculately coiffed and made up, are great at baking peanut butter pie, are coyly flirtatious yet sexually reserved...the list goes on. They are essentially playing the "China doll" character that Westerners *wish* to see in an Asian woman, which was exoticized in early Hollywood and continues to remain a standard media trope. Only a few of the characters (Lindo is a good example, both in her old age and as a younger woman) are strong-willed and willing to speak their minds. Even in the case of Lindo, her outspoken behavior isn't really subversive or powerful—her loudmouthed, bold antics are only refreshing in comparison to the mild, meek behavior of all the other women in the film. It is a safe and familiar girlish deviousness that she enacts, not a true channeling of significant strength or power, not an overturning of racially-charged sexist stereotypes.

Seeming to exist solely as a foil for these delicate and deserving women, a large number of male

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2 Edward Said, *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979. 62.

characters in the film are shallowly-written villains that are simultaneously sexless yet sexually dominating. The sexlessness of Asian characters in Western films is a phenomenon that has often been noted—it is rare to find an Asian male actor that oozes desirability and amped-up macho sexuality in the way that nearly every popular white male actor does. The Asian man is generally cast as the noble and ascetic mystical, the Fu Manchu-style villain, or the goofy yellow joke complete with buckteeth and poor English.

Fittingly, the role of the classic Prince Charming is entirely played by white men in this film—late 1980s heartthrob Andrew McCarthy plays the most sympathetic male character, and is depicted as the most desirable, with a scene early on showing Rose falling helplessly in love with his baby blue eyes. The Chinese men in this film are either outright “bad guys,” as with Lena's husband Harold or Ying-Ying's adulterous and abusive first husband, or powerless non-entities, as with Suyuan's soft-bodied, soft-spoken father or Old Chong the piano teacher. The only truly positive depiction of an Asian man is that of Lena's new husband—handsome, tall, humorous, kind—who is given less than 10 seconds of screentime at the very end of the film.

The gender roles in this film only serve to cement Western desires regarding Asian characters. Asian males must not under any circumstances challenge white American male authority, and the women exist entirely for the pleasure of us (the audience) and the men in the story. We are meant to quietly note how *pretty* and *small* they are, even as we attempt to understand the harrowing tribulations and horrific abuse they endured.

Of course, in classic Hollywood fashion, casting of the Asian actors was done in a thoroughly inauthentic manner, selecting Vietnamese, Vietnamese-French, Japanese and Macanese women for the roles of Chinese mainland-born women and their offspring. Those who cannot speak Chinese are

simply not given any lines in Chinese, or otherwise speak it very poorly, assuming that the effect will remain undiminished for white American viewers. The language sounds non-English, which is all that matters.

I find it problematic that the idea of the all-inclusive pan-Asian identity permeates this extremely culturally-specific work, easily substituting any attractive yellow woman to play the role of a Chinese or Chinese-American character. Of course I do not condemn acting outside of your own ethnicity, and it is certainly a huge step above whites playing Asians in yellowface, but I still find there to be an obvious disregard for specific Asian identities and a sort of homogenizing and lumping-together of Asian nationalities and races.

*The Joy Luck Club* is a film that, in many ways, was helpful and encouraging for me as a Korean-American child growing up in New York. It implied that the Asian-American story was one worthy of telling producing for the cinema. It legitimized my experience in multiple ways: when I was the sole child of Asian descent in my entire public school, when I found that the literature in our curricula and the pop media I was inundated by were completely void of any mention of Asian culture. In this way, the film sought to bring the Asian experience into the mainstream public eye, and succeeded in doing so.

Yet I think about how much harm, also, the film may have done in my formative years, to my awareness of my color, my heritage, and my interactions with white Americans. I've watched this movie ten, maybe fifteen times, possibly more. I have to wonder if the limited scope allowed to the female characters, or the steadfastly negative portrayal of Asian men, somehow influenced the way I viewed and defined myself and other Asians around me.

Chin, Frank. "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," A Companion to Asian American Studies

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