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ОБРАЗ АМЕРИКАНЦЕВ АЗИАТСКОГО ПРОИСХОЖДЕНИЯ В АМЕРИКАНСКОМ ОБЩЕСТВЕ НА ПРИМЕРЕ АМЕРИКАНСКОЙ КИНОИНДУСТРИИ

Аннотация: В статье рассматриваются стереотипы и расовые предубеждения в сторону сообщества американцев азиатского происхождения в США, проанализированные на примере американской киноиндустрии. В статье проведен анализ исторических предпосылок формирования стереотипных образов, их происхождение и развитие в классических американских фильмах, а также современное положение расовой группы в американском кинематографе.

Ключевые слова: Американцы азиатского происхождения, расизм, американская киноиндустрия, расовые стереотипы, расизм в киноиндустрии.

Abstract: The article discusses stereotypes and racial prejudices towards the Asian American community in the USA analyzed on the example of the American film industry. The article analyzes the historical background of the formation of stereotypical images, their origin and development in classic American films, as well as the current position of the racial group in American cinema.

Keywords: Asian Americans, racism, American film industry, racial stereotypes, racism in the film industry.

Historical background

From the very beginning, the United States developed as a society of immigrants. For the first time, Asian descendants appeared on the territory of the US in 1763, immediately after the Seven Years War. They were Filipinos, escaped from Spanish ships because of the difficult conditions and settled in Louisiana. The first Chinese sailors appeared in Hawaii in 1778. Some of them stayed on the islands, taking the wives of local women. In the XIX century, many immigrants from Korea, Japan and China arrived in Hawaii to work on sugar plantations. Thus, currently, Hawaii is the state where people of Asian descent constitute the majority. The arrival of Japanese and especially Chinese immigrants to the United States has increased dramatically in the last third of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Western expansionism allowed US citizens to come into contact with Asians (primarily Chinese) men who were crossing the Pacific Ocean to California and other Western states. Just as European immigrants came to the Eastern United States during those years, many Asians came to Western America in search of more freedoms and a higher standard of living. Asian immigrants faced a huge amount of discrimination and prejudice, similar to what have experienced most immigrant groups.

Following historical ideas about race, many Americans considered Asian people to be “not white” but the “yellow race”. Asians were often singled out for special forms of discrimination. Many racist laws were passed that specifically disallowed Asian immigration (such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Immigration Act of 1924), also there were laws legislating what kinds of jobs Asians could and could not do in America [4].

This set of circumstances tended to keep Asian men in positions of menial labor and created some lingering Asian stereotypes - the Chinese laundry worker or the Asian “coolie” working on the railroad stem from this era's discriminatory laws. In other types of immigration legislation, it became nearly impossible for Chinese men to bring their wives and families to America. In some communities, Asian American men sometimes outnumbered Asian American women by a ratio of twenty-five to one. Some of these men gravitated toward the cities, and the urban ghettos where they settled, often became known as “Chinatowns”. Excluded from the

American dream of free-market capitalism by racist work laws, some Chinese men turned toward illegal means of making money, and organized criminal gangs, or Tongs, to sell black-market goods. The so-called “Tong Wars” that occurred in various Chinatowns from about 1910 to 1930 were fought over control of illicit black-market commodities such as opium, gambling, and prostitution. White-run newspapers often capitalized on this situation to sell newspapers: Asians were now branded as the “Yellow Peril” or the “Yellow Horde”. Hollywood followed suit and produced many films that exploited images of Asian American criminality [4].

The origin of stereotypes

Before the Hollywood Production Code was written in 1930 many American films freely exploited many subjects that now could seem for us extremely racist. According to the establishment of mentioned above stereotypes in Hollywood were produced films like “*The Yellow Menace*” (1916), “*The Tong Man*” (1919), and “*Chinatown Nights*” (1929) focused on underworld kingpins and secret empires. These early films also often exploited the concept of white slavery, the idea that white women were being kidnapped by Chinese American gang and sold into prostitution.

Further, on the grounds of social fears over White-Asian miscegenation, numerous old American movies emphasized the topic of “impossible love” between these two races. For instance, D.W. Griffith's “*Broken Blossom*” (1919) tells the tragic story of an Asian man who longs for the love of a white woman. And although the Chinese man Cheng Huan (played in make-up by a white actor) is a sympathetic character the film repeatedly refers to him as “The Chink”, a term now considered a racially abusive epithet but which was common use in the early 1900s. True to the Hollywood formula, the love between an Asian man and a white woman ends in death. The woman dies when her abusive father beats her, and Cheng Huan commits suicide over his lost love. The message of this film, and many others like it, makes it abundantly clear that interracial relationships invariably end in a disaster either for the lovers themselves or for their children [4]. Asian people were often used in American movies as something exotic. For example, in the movie “*Lost Horizon*”

(1937), white people discover a utopian city of Shangri-la located somewhere in the Himalayas. This geographical area became quite common, and in the movie serial *“Lost City of the Jungle”* (1946), the “lost city” of Pendrang was also supposedly located somewhere in the mountains of Northern India. Pendrang and Shangri-la are both presented as mysterious lands and their Asian inhabitants function mostly as extras: the movies present them as marginal even within their own cities. Few supporting roles played by Asian actors in those movies are either helpful aides or villainous henchmen to the white characters, but rarely central characters themselves. Furthermore, in the *“Lost Horizon”*, the characters of people of Shangri-la who had lines in the movie were mostly played by white actors.

Nevertheless, the two most pervasive images of Asians in classical Hollywood cinema were Charlie Chan and Dr Fu Manchu. Despite some major differences (Chan was a hero while Fu Manchu was a villain), both characters embody the stereotype of inscrutable Oriental – Asians with superior intellect who are potentially untrustworthy because of their mysterious behavior. Not surprisingly, both characters were derived from literary sources that had been written by white men in the 1920s. Their impact has been long-lasting, and films featuring the characters of Charlie Chan and Dr Fu Manchu have even been produced in more recent decades.

Charlie Chan was a Chinese-American detective and member of the Honolulu police force. He was created by mystery writer Earl Derr Biggers and first appeared in a film in 1926. Hollywood made over 50 feature films about Charlie Chan during the next few decades. In each, the great detective is called upon to solve a murder or other criminal act, and does so through brilliant deductive reasoning, much like Sherlock Holmes. However, Charlie Chan was never played by an Asian actor (the most successful was Swedish actor Warner Orland). The few Asian actors who were cast in the films usually appeared in supporting roles as Charlie Chan's sons.

Though the character of Charlie Chan was more of a “good” Asian stereotype, Charlie Chan has been frequently criticized by Chinese Americans not only because of its selective “white” casting but also because he quickly became a stereotype himself. Although he was supposed to be highly educated with a brilliant mind, Chan

tended to speak in broken English and make cryptic quips that suggested both the sayings of Chinese philosopher Confucius and the silly predictions of fortune cookies. Furthermore, Charlie Chan's Chinese heritage was never really presented in the films and his sons seem to exist merely for comic relief, frequently confounding his investigations [4].

The opposing “bad stereotype” was embodied by the super-criminal Dr Fu Manchu. Explicitly not interested in the assimilation in USA, Fu Manchu was an evil genius, using his “Oriental tricks” to bend the rest of the world to his will through conspiracy, torture, and exploitation. The character of Dr Fu Manchu was created by Englishman Sax Rohmer, and on screen, he was also played by white actors in “yellowface”. Before becoming Charlie Chan, the actor Warner Orland played Fu Manchu in a series of films. Perhaps most famous Fu Manchu portrayal was made by horror film star Boris Karloff in the movie “The Mask of Fu Manchu” (1932). In that pre-Code movie, Fu Manchu's cruelty was given free rein. He gleefully feeds saltwater to a man dying of thirst a man who is simultaneously having his eardrums ruptured underneath a large, tolling bell. Another victim is slowly lowered into a crocodile pit via a sand clock, while yet another is strapped into a room of gradually constricting spiked walls. Fu Manchu's daughter is an opium-smoking sadist who takes obvious sexual delight in seeing the white hero chained, stripped, and whipped. When MGM tried to re-release the film in the early 1970s, Asian Americans protested, and the film was eventually re-edited with some scenes cut.

Asian women as well were heavily stereotyped by the American film industry. One of the most prevalent stereotypical portrayals of Asian women in classical Hollywood films is “dragon lady”, a female equivalent of Fu Manchu. The dragon lady was likely to be a spy or criminal master-mind, but along with violence, she used seduction as one of her tools to entrap unsuspecting white heroes. While this character was often played by white actresses too (or even Hispanic), the most famous portrayal was made by Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong. She acted in the movies like “*Toll of the Sea*” and “*A Trip to Chinatown*” (1926), but quickly became typecast in movies like “*The Devil Dancer*” (1927), “*Daughter of the*

Dragon” (1931) and “*Shanghai Express*” (1932). However, after some time she became annoyed by the treatment of Asian Americans in Hollywood and left the United States to star in the films abroad [4].

In this way, since the 1930s, when “Dragon Lady” became fixed in the English language, the term has been applied countless times to powerful Asian women. Today, “Dragon Lady” term is often considered mostly anachronistically, nonetheless, the term is still in use in the film industry, for example in popular American epic movie “*Avatar*”.

That is how Asian perception was dramatically shaped not only in the USA but also in the whole world, which watches Hollywood movies. But although classical stereotype images as Yellow Peril, lotus blossom, Charlie Chan, Fu Manchu, Dragon Lady are still remaining alive, new images and features come into play in contemporary movies.

Stereotyping in contemporary films

The most noticeable current image of Asians in American movies is law-abiding, well-educated racial groups, which outperforms others. This type widely used in mass films and teenage series like “*Glee*”, there 2 representatives of Asians were the best students in school, highly talented and hard-working children from wealthy families.

Next widespread feature shown in contemporary films is that many white people see all Asians as the same group without giving any consideration to their differences. For example, in the movie “*Crash*”, Anthony, a criminal who steals cars, at the end of the movie liberates trapped Asian immigrants on the streets of Los Angeles and gives them all the money in his possession. But despite Anthony’s kind gesture, he refers to them as “Chinamen” although they were supposedly Thai [6]. As well in the movie “*Gran Torino*” the protagonist Walt Kowalski tells to Hmong family that lives next-door, that he was killing people like them, although he was killing Korean people, during the Korean War, while the family is from Hmong ethnic group, which is not related to Koreans.

One of the most usual stereotype, which shapes Asian characters in the movies, is referred to bad English. In closing of “*Crash*” then Asian-American character Kim runs into hospital shouting a name of her Korean husband, a doctor who sees her, primarily asks her if she can speak English. As well in the opening scene of “*Crash*” in a conversation between Ria and Kim, Ria’s mocking of Kim suggests that she wanted to show her that she speaks broken English. But in that scene they have also revealed stereotypes that are different from those discussed in the literature, such as “all Asians are bad drivers”, which is mocked in the scene when Ria walks away and asks the officer to write in his report how shocked she was by having been hit by an Asian driver [6]. Despite the fact that in “*Crash*” there wasn’t a lot of scenes with Asians they managed to appeal not only to these stereotypes but also to Asian “villain” stereotype, as how it was discovered later in the movie Kim’s husband turned out to be a criminal, who profits from selling Thai people into slavery. This portrayal recalled the tradition of stereotyping Asians as villains from classical movies mentioned before [6].

Yet not all the contemporary American movies portrait Asian people according to usual stereotypes. Today more and more filmmakers try to show Asian American characters not as people made up from a set of typical Asian images but as normal Americans having their background which shapes their individuality. For example, the cast of the popular Netflix series “*13 Reasons Why*” consists of two Asians, whose racial identity is not overly emphasized in their behavior and actions or social status. They both managed to be quite popular in school, having not the worst and not the best personal characteristics among other personages. Another TV series, which managed to break typical Asian stereotype on screen, is sitcom “*Selfie*”. In contrast to the classical movie “*Broken Blossom*” that established the Hollywood formula of impossible love between “Asians” and “Whites”, “*Selfie*” puts in the center of the plot a couple of a white girl and Asian-American boy (played by John Cho, American actor of Korean background). The fact that an Asian-American male was the romantic lead in a role not written for an Asian actor in the prime-time series have been a real breakthrough. Anyway from John’s words, for him, it was more important

to play his role well, than the fact that his character was dating a white girl, but for some guys he knows, it was a real revelation [8].

Such TV shows as “*Selfie*” are making some kind of revolution. They dare not only to have an Asian actor for the lead role, but also to have that person to be portrayed **attractive**. Unfortunately, usually for the most of the time, Asian men are not portrayed as being particularly desirable. Interracial relationships in films were (and are) almost exclusively presented as a White male and a non-White female, with the reverse rarely ever occurring. Asian women were exotic and alluring, Asian men were, asexual at best. Anyway, that trend is slowly going down and we already can enjoy some believable characters from TV series such as Henry Higgs from “*Selfie*” or for example Han Seoul-Oh from the “*Fast & Furious*”. The same for women, with the example of Angela Montenegro from “*Bones*” or Dr. Cristina Yang from “*Grey’s anatomy*” we see another rareness on TV — an Asian woman who is considered attractive in a right way and fully owns her sexuality without being “exotic” or a “vulgar”.

But does this old tradition of showing Asians in two contrary images (criminals and law-abiding modest Americans) remains popular? Yes, and possibly it will remain this way for a long time, as both of the images are connected with reality and history. This contrast was well portrayed in one of the most popular movies about Asian Americans – “*Gran Torino*”.

Asian Americans in “*Gran Torino*”

This film is not only shows us different images of Asian Americans, but also draws the attention of the audience to the real issues in Hmong immigrant’s community, that makes this movie not only entertaining but informative and educating.

The film features a large Hmong American cast. Set in Detroit, Michigan, it is the first mainstream American film to feature Hmong Americans, who form a large community in USA since many Lao Hmong war refugees resettled in the states following the communist takeover of Laos in 1975.

From the very first scenes, that movie works as a mirror, reflecting two houses and the worlds living inside them: only separated by a typical white fence and by two adjacent gardens, two twin buildings mirror each other, by shaping their inhabitants' identities. Their identical and different sitting rooms are crowned by relatives and friends celebrating the opposite extreme segments of existence: death and life [3; 6]. The first house is the house of Walt Kowalski, a typical American man of an old generation, who has just lost his wife. Having funeral banquet in his house he feels lost among his family of a new American generation, with different values and behaviors, which he doesn't share or appreciate. Despite the blood relationship, which is supposed to be the strongest, and the ethnic, social and cultural similarities, Walt looks like a foreigner in his own family. At the same time in the twin house – so similar and so different – Walt's neighbors are having a party to celebrate a newborn. Even in this case, a special occasion brings big family together, and their family looks much more sincere than in the first house [3].

One of the most important elements of the film is this representation of a two Americas – the old one and the young one – portrayed as in comparison and in conflict, although always dealing with the eternal chimera of the American Dream. Eastwood represents all the classical aspects of the American Dream – poorness, hard work, legality and compensation. Then Tao and his sister embody purity and innocence, which old American seems to lose. That is what Walt sees when he finally looks through the white fence. Beyond the boundary of his garden, he finally sees America reflected on his Hmong neighbor's face. He feels, finally, more in common with the “others” than with his own family [3]. His final choice is to sacrifice himself to preserve that innocence the old America had lost, and which is essential to pursue that American Dream made up of happiness and dignity [3; 5].

At the same time “*Gran Torino*” portrays negative “villain” Asian image in the movie through Hmong gang living in the same neighborhood, which presses and assaults Tao and his family, and in the end kills “indestructible” Clint Eastwood. It is hard to say if this portrayal of ferocious killers ill-fit for American society feels impartial. Especially when one of the most controversial phrases was dropped in one

of the scenes by the character of Sue: “It’s really common. Hmong girls over here fit in better. The girls go to college. The boys go to jail.” It is not surprising that Hmong actors and audience have been dissatisfied about their portrayal in “*Gran Torino*”. But the actors who participated in the “*Gran Torino*” movie from casting, through shooting, to its popular reception have gone through significant transformations in their perspectives on the film. They point out that despite egregious bad portrayals, “*Gran Torino*” focuses on Hmong community, which is unprecedented and has the potential to encourage the audiences to learn more about who the Hmong are. Some suggest that stereotyping is something all people engage in, and that this film simply presents what is seen through the eyes of an old white American [7].

It wouldn’t be true to say that “*Gran Torino*” is free of stereotypes, it consists of them but they are crucial to the idea that the movie brings. Even all these “gook”, “wetback”, “coon”, “dragonlady” words, which came out from Clint Eastwood’s mouth are used not in an abusive manner. The use of these normally forbidden words as jokes shows that the American society already moved far enough from racial violence against Asian people and other communities of color that they can comfortably laugh at it [1; 2].

This leaves us with the question of whether “*Gran Torino*”, as a movie about racial tensions, does anything new or whether it merely serves to reinforce the established images of Asians in American films. Most likely it does, starting with casting real ethnic actors for Hmong roles and finishing with presenting Asian immigrants as the respectable future of USA. Nevertheless, American film industry is still quite far from a cardinal change of its patterns, as even “*Gran Torino*” finishes with the scene, where main Hmong characters are being locked in a basement, while the world has been saved by the white hero, which is a spectacular metaphor for this perennial sidelining.

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