

A cultural studies analysis of the over-sexualization of Asian women in Hollywood

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Abstract. Stereotypes of Asian women have long persisted, portraying them as submissive, docile and over-sexualized individuals. These traits often remain overlooked, despite the fact that as human beings they are rich in unique personalities. Passive racism perpetuates these harmful generalizations, leading to the devaluation of the Asian race as a whole. This study aims to draw attention to this critical issue and to explore alternative perspectives that challenge traditional images of Asian women. To achieve this goal, ten films were analysed in depth to determine whether contemporary media representations continue to reinforce passive, docile images of Asian women. The results of the study show that despite some progress, the worrying trend of over-objectification and societal neglect of Asian women persists. This study delves into the psychology of society's overemphasis on perpetuating stereotypes and the resulting impact on Asian women's self-perceptions and social roles. In addition, this study emphasizes the historical roots of prejudice and misogyny that continue to influence Western society's perception of Asian women.

1 Introduction

Asian women are highly infatuated in human society, especially by white men, and one of the root causes of this problem is the stereotype of the "lotus" - also known as the "porcelain doll" or "geisha girl." Lotus "quiet, docile, obedient to male partners, showing a super feminine, infantile innocence." There are other images of sex workers.

The image of the lotus depicts Asians as objects of desire, but dispensable. The authors aim their perspective at the phenomenon of sexualization in cinema, analysing and organizing the phenomenon in which characters, individuals, or content are presented or portrayed in a way that overemphasizes sexual characteristics. This phenomenon manifests itself in a variety of forms in films, often centered on sexual attraction to the exclusion of other personalities, abilities, or traits, thus limiting the value of characters to their sexuality.

1.1 Over sexualization

In media, oversexualization refers to the portrayal or depiction of characters, individuals, or content in a manner that excessively emphasizes their sexual attributes. This phenomenon manifests in several ways: Firstly, there is an excessive emphasis on physical appearance, prioritizing the characters' physical attractiveness and sexual appeal over other aspects of their personality or abilities [1].

Secondly, media may include gratuitous nudity or explicit sexual content that serves no essential purpose in advancing the plot or conveying the media's message.

Such elements are often included solely for titillation or shock value [2].

Lastly, oversexualization in media contributes to the promotion of unrealistic and unattainable body standards. This can lead to body image issues and lower self-esteem among the audience, as they may feel pressure to conform to these unrealistic ideals [3].

1.2 Impact on Asian women and society

The over-sexualization of Asian women in the media can negatively impact their self-esteem, body image, and cultural perception. It perpetuates harmful stereotypes and may influence their social interactions with Western groups [4-6].

1.3 Media industry and representation issues

A director's or producer's perceptions and biases play a significant role in shaping the portrayal of Asian women on screen. Their personal views can influence how these women are depicted, potentially leading to oversexualization and reinforcement of stereotypes [7]. Moreover, audience acceptance and perceptions also contribute to the popularity of such content. Discussions on social media and how different groups perceive these portrayals can further fuel the prevalence of oversexualized depictions of Asian women in media [8].

1.4 Overview of this phenomenon

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In contemporary society, Asian women frequently become the subjects of sexual fetishization, particularly in the eyes of white men. This phenomenon finds its roots in the pervasive "lotus blossom" stereotype, alternately known as the "China doll" or "Geisha Girl" image. The "lotus blossom" archetype portrays Asian women as docile, submissive partners, projecting an image of hyperfeminine, almost infantile innocence. This image is further heightened by the pervasive hypersexualization that often casts them as mere objects of sexual desire, or even as sex workers. A jarring instance from cinema, the line "me so horny, me love you long time" from Stanley Kubrick's "Full Metal Jacket" (1987), encapsulates the reduction of Asian women to sexual objects. The "lotus blossom" archetype essentially reduces Asian characters to objects of desire, ones deemed disposable, confined to obedience, subservience, and a lack of individual agency. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 exemplifies historical discrimination, prohibiting the immigration of Asian women under the pretext of "immoral purposes." This legislation, coupled with colonialist attitudes, shaped the trope of the "lotus blossom," which perpetuated the view of Asian women as both sexual and submissive. Originating from Pierre Loti's autobiographical novel "Madame Chrysanthemums" in 1887, the archetype's influence extended to John Luther Long's 1898 story "Madame Butterfly." These works played a role in romanticizing the "docile war bride" concept, reinforcing an idealized version of submissive Asian women as both sexually servile and domestic servants. The mid-20th century saw the emergence of the "military sexual complex" due to extensive US military presence in Asia. This complex institutionalized prostitution through agreements with Asian governments, contributing to the pervasive hypersexualization of Asian women in Western media. The economic hardships caused by war led many impoverished Asian women into prostitution, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation by American soldiers. The commodification of East Asian women's bodies serves as both a vehicle for white sexual imperialism and a colonialist effort to assert dominance over non-white women. This is a manifestation of Edward Said's concept of orientalism—a Western tool to dominate and restructure the East, finding expression in a sexualized stereotype that reduces East Asian women to verbal inexpressiveness and objectification. Contemporary Asian representation in Western media reflects a systemic problem of racial inequality and white supremacy. The Atlanta spa shootings exposed long-standing fears of racialized misogyny and objectification, shedding light on the everyday sexualization that Asian women face. The shooting, where six Asian women were killed, represents a crest of anti-Asian hate that has surged globally. According to an April Pew Research Centre survey, 81% of Asian-Americans feel violence against them is on the rise in the US. The events in Atlanta further underscore the interwoven nature of hateful violence and everyday sexualization, as seen in the press conference that labelled the shooter's actions as stemming from "sexual addiction." The history of East and Southeast Asian women being marginalized,

sexualized, and portrayed as submissive remains long-standing. This history is marked by a persistent othering, with these women often seen as sexual objects rather than ordinary citizens. Despite progress, these attitudes persist, fuelling discrimination and animating white supremacist ideologies. The pervasive representation of Asian women as sexualized objects reveals a deeply ingrained stereotyping and commodification, which denies their individuality and agency. Addressing these issues necessitates understanding their historical roots, the perpetuation of stereotypes through media, and the larger systems at play.

2 Method

The authors conducted an in-depth analysis of 10 films to determine whether contemporary media representations continue to reinforce passive, docile images of Asian women. The authors considered multiple aspects, and multiple dimensions that might represent the phenomenon of sexualization, and created Table 1-3.

In order to understand how Asian women feel about the sexualization phenomenon, the authors collected comments from Asian women under the sexualization video. There are 138 comments under the video discussing the Asian girl stereotype on Bili Bili. Among them, 113 comments expressed being offended by the portrayal. Interestingly, 4 comments mentioned that they have never encountered such representation of Asian women in movies while they were abroad. Additionally, 9 comments noted that many Asian women, despite having a white identity, tend to prefer dating individuals of other races rather than Asian partners.

Table 1. The phenomenon of sexualization in different films (1)

Films	Sayonara	The teahouse of the August moon	The world of Suzie wang
Phenomenon			
Asian women paired with white men -80%	1	1	1
The Asian women is treat and seen as a gift	1	1	1
The female character is a sex worker -90%	1	1	1
The female character is often been hypersexualize by sexual stunner -which is often pleasing other males in the film- close up shot of their body-100%	1	1	1
Is there an imbalance social	1	1	1

status between the man and the women.-100%			
Does the male character play the dominating role in the relationship-(able to decide when to ended this relationship). -100%	1	1	1
The female character is been praise for her submissive, docile ,innocent and submissive personalities more than once-100%	1	1	1
Is the country of the female character been or is invade by the male's character.-60%	0	1	0
There is often no consequences for the male character this relationship, but the women character has negative consequences	0	0	0
The female character's main reason that is been seen by the male character is the praised for her exotic element	1	1	1
The male character saved the female character at least once(culture or traditional relevant)	0	0	0
After the short period of romantic relationship, the male character is backed to his normal life - disposal relationship	0	1	0
The country of the male character's is known as more modern and developed, while the country of	0	1	1

the female character are know as more savage and brutal.			
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Table 2. The phenomenon of sexualization in different films (2)

Films	Full metal jacket (1987)	The spelling dictionary	Miss Saigon
Asian women paired with white men -80%	1	1	1
The Asian women is treat and seen as a gift	0	0	0
The female character is a sex worker -90%	1	1	1
The female character is often been hypersexualize by sexual stunner -which is often pleasing other males in the film- close up shot of their body-100%	1	1	1
Is there an imbalance social status between the man and the women.-100%	1	1	1
Does the male character play the dominating role in the relationship-(able to decide when to ended this relationship). -100%	1	1	1
The female character is been praise for her submissive, docile ,innocent and submissive personalities more than once-100%	0	1	1
Is the country of the female character been or is invade by the male's character.-60%	1	1	1
There is often no consequences for the male character this relationship, but the women	0	1	1

character has negative consequences			
The female character's main reason that is been seen by the male character is the praised for her exotic element	0	1	1
The male character saved the female character at least once(culture or traditional relevant)	0	1	1
After the short period of romantic relationship, the male character is backed to his normal life - disposal relationship	1	1	1
The country of the male character's is known as more modern and developed, while the country of the female character are know as more savage and brutal.	0	1	1

Is there an imbalance social status between the man and the women.-100%	1	1	1
Does the male character play the dominating role in the relationship-(able to decide when to ended this relationship). - 100%	1	1	1
The female character is been praise for her submissive, docile ,innocent and submissive personalities more than once-100%	1	1	1
Is the country of the female character been or is invade by the male's character.-60%	0	0	0
There is often no consequences for the male character this relationship, but the women character has negative consequences	0	1	0
The female character's main reason that is been seen by the male character is the praised for her exotic element	1	1	1
The male character saved the female character at least once(culture or traditional relevant)	0	0	1
After the short period of romantic relationship, the male character is backed to his normal life - disposal relationship	1	1	1
The country of the male character's is known as more modern and	1	1	0

Table 3. The phenomenon of sexualization in different films

(3)

Films Phenomenon	Year of the dragon	The quiet American	Memories of a Gisha
Asian women paired with white men -80%	1	1	0
The Asian women is treat and seen as a gift	1	1	1
The female character is a sex worker -90%	1	1	1
The female character is often been hypersexualize by sexual stunner -which is often pleasing other males in the film- close up shot of their body-100%	1	1	1

developed, while the country of the female character are know as more savage and brutal.			
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3 Findings

Comments under videos on Bilibili discussing stereotypes of Asian girls show a great deal of concern and resentment towards the portrayal of Asian women in the media. Many viewers expressed their displeasure with the stereotypes portrayed in the film and how these stereotypes contribute to the over-sexualization and misrepresentation of Asian women [8-9].

It was also noted that some viewers had never seen such stereotypes of Asian women while abroad, suggesting that these stereotypes may be more prevalent in certain regions or media markets. The comments also revealed the dating preferences of Asian women with white identities, with some stating that they tend to date people of other races rather than Asian partners [10].

Overall, the comments reflect a growing awareness of the harmful effects of stereotyping and over-sexualizing Asian women in the media. This highlights the need for more balanced and respectful coverage of Asian women to dispel misconceptions and challenge harmful stereotypes. Promoting accurate portrayals of diverse identities is essential to creating a more inclusive and equitable media environment.

4 Conclusion

Although authors are objective in judging whether the target films are sexualizing women, authors still need a more standardized set of evaluations to make the survey more researched. At the same time, the type of movie influences the authors' evaluations. It is hoped that more subsequent surveys will improve the evaluation system and will be able to determine the situation for most of the movies.

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