
CHANGING PORTRAYALS OF ASIANS IN FILMS

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Abstrak: *This research focuses on an anti-whitewashing movement in films and how it connects with the shifting portrayals and stereotypes of Asians in films. The period addressed in this study is from 1995 to 2021. The researcher begins by recognizing whitewashing issues and concerns in casting Asian actors and identifying stereotypical images of Asians portrayed in two films: the original version of *Mortal Kombat*, which was released in 1995, and the contemporary remake of the film, which was released in 2021. This research used content analysis to compare the portrayals and stereotypes of Asians in both films. The data indicate that racist images of Asians seen in *Mortal Combat 1995* have been removed in *Mortal Combat 2021*.*

Keywords: *Asians, Portrayal, Stereotypes*

Abstrak: Studi ini mengkaji gerakan anti-whitewashing di Hollywood dan bagaimana gerakan tersebut berkorelasi dengan perubahan representasi dan stereotip orang Asia ditampilkan di dalam film dari tahun 1995 hingga 2021. *Mortal Kombat* (1995) dan *Mortal Kombat* (2021) merupakan objek yang digunakan untuk membandingkan representasi dan stereotip yang ditunjukkan pada kedua film tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode konten analisis. Data menunjukkan penggambaran rasial yang seperti yang ditunjukkan pada film *Mortal Kombat* (2015) tidak terdapat dalam film *Mortal Kombat* (2021).

Kata Kunci: Aktor Asia, Representasi, Stereotip

A. INTRODUCTION

Film is a reflection of reality. Cloete states that "Film tells us stories about themes of everyday experiences like love, hope, death, good, evil, violence, and peace" (Cloete, 2017). Films have the possibility to bring various themes. It portrays stories of people and cultures of a society. The portrayal of Asian in Hollywood is an example of realities that is reflected in films. However, there are not many portrayals of Asians in Hollywood, and the only portrayals that we are exposed to are the same stereotypes over and over. To make it worse, the portrayals of Asians are sometimes represented by Caucasian actors.

During the period of 1997, the practice of casting white actors in the roles of non-white characters in a film was commonly referred to as whitewashing. Whitewashing refers to the practice of selecting white actors to portray characters of non-white ethnic backgrounds. An instance of whitewashing within the context of film can be seen in the 2010 film *Prince of Persia* in which the role of Prince Dastan was portrayed by Jake Gyllenhaal. In the *Doctor Strange* film released in 2016, Tilda Swinton, a Scottish actress of Caucasian descent, was chosen to portray the role of a Tibetan monk. One of the most controversial examples of whitewashing in Hollywood occurred in the film *Breakfast at Tiffany's* in 1961, where the character of Mr. Yunioshi, a Japanese landlord, was represented by Caucasian actor Mickey Rooney. The racist use of makeup and prosthetics in order to alter Rooney's appearance in the film can be seen as a disturbing repetition of a stereotype (EW Staff, April 14, "Julia Roberts as Harriet Tubman and 17 other outrageous and controversial movie castings"). In summary, the act of whitewashing removes cultural identity and effectively turns culture to a mere garment that can be imposed by everyone.

Furthermore, the portrayal of Asian-American in Hollywood frequently relies on social stereotypes. An Asian mother is commonly classified as a "tiger mom," meaning a mother who constantly forces her children to succeed in all aspects of life. In the film industry, it is common for Asian actors to be predominantly cast in less important roles, often portraying characters such as a pizza delivery person or a math geek, or sometimes they are given a role as a bad driver.

Responding to this lack of diversity and repeated Asian stereotypes on the screen, Anti-whitewashing moves have been started as a response to the public desire to see more authentic portrayals in films. To begin with, In 2016, William Yu started a social media trend with the hashtag #StarringJohnCho. It was an action to raise awareness of the lack of Asian-American leading men in films. The hashtag rapidly gained popularity on the social media platform Twitter, Yu edited film posters by using Cho's face to replace the original one. Two years after, John Cho was offered some leading roles, and played in *Searching* and *Colombus*, and finally, he made it as the first Asian man to be the lead in a Hollywood thriller.

This under-representation of Asian Americans in Hollywood is what triggered the researchers to find out more about this issue. The researchers decided to choose a film

made during this time in order to see and compare how Asians were portrayed before the anti-whitewashing campaign versus after the anti-whitewashing campaign. In order to study how the anti-whitewashing campaign affected the representation of Asians in film, the researchers compare *Mortal Kombat* (1995) to its contemporary remake *Mortal Kombat* (2021), and analyze the differences in race relations and representation, more specifically the Asian characters in both films. These films are relevant because the original version was made before the anti-whitewashing campaign, and its remake was released 25 years later, in 2021 or after the anti-whitewashing campaign. Based on the background of the study, the main objective of this research is to determine if and how the movement affected Asian representation in Hollywood by analyzing the differences in these films.

B. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1. Stereotypes

The first piece of this chapter is to understand stereotypes and their relation to film. Schweinitz pointed out that a stereotype is the verbal expression of a belief that is directed towards social groups or single persons as members of these groups (Schweinitz, 2011). On the other hand, Katz and Braly agreed that stereotype focuses on belief patterns and emphasizes their guiding influence on attitudes and perceptions (qt. in Schweinitz). To summarize, a stereotype is a broad and vague conception about people or a particular group that can be used as a guide for individuals to adapt to their surroundings.

The function of stereotypes is described by Lippmann as a mental image which is used to make judgments of people (qtd. in Schweinitz, 2011). Moreover, Lippmann suggests that there should be flexibility in the use of stereotypes to avoid error judgment because it is constructed based on general beliefs and a quick process, sometimes stereotypes can mislead to appropriate judgment and discrimination towards a particular group (qt. In Schweinitz, 2011)—for example, Black Americans. The first picture that appears is probably a robber, an enslaved person, an aggressive or rude person, a smuggler, and a drug dealer. They are broad concepts and representations embedded in the psyche as a product of television, film, books, and other forms of media, as well as social interaction and popular

thought. These images of Black Americans contain prejudice and negative connotation, which people might believe if they understand stereotypes as a fixed thing.

These brief explanations about stereotypes are relevant to the analysis of media texts, such as film because the analysis of media-text content is frequently determined by social psychology. Knowing that media is a reflection of the world, it plays an essential role in communicating and distributing corresponding ideas and attitudes, including those described as "Stereotypes" (Schwinitz, 2011).

2. Asian-American stereotypes in films.

Given the central focus of this study on the portrayal of Asian Americans, it is imperative to understand how stereotypes of this group have evolved. The evolution of this group was classified by Lee into two distinct eras. The initial period under consideration spans from the late 1800s to the early 1900s, whereas the subsequent age pertains to contemporary Hollywood, as discussed in ("The Evolution of Chinese and Asian Faces in Hollywood.").

a. Asian-Americans in 1800s – 1900s

During this time, Asian Americans play parts that fit into a particular category. It means that the part they get does not seem very important to the story and is just a representation of how people thought of Asian Americans at the time. A study done by Mihori shows that in the 1920s, Asian artists were often cast as the evil guys. This was particularly notable in the 1940s (145). For instance, they are cast as servants, waiters, laundry workers, coolies, gangsters, and kung-fu masters, and if they are women, they are prostitutes or spa workers. Besides, there was a whitewashing term that marked this era. According to Brook, whitewashing is "to cast white actors for non-white roles." Another norm was Yellow-face, in which actors had to wear makeup to look Asian, and sometimes inappropriate ways, such as using prosthetics to slant their eyes, which became popular in the 1930s. For example, in 1937, "The Good Earth," a film that tells the story of Chinese farmers in a rural area, was led by Caucasian actors. Nevertheless, Dong expressed his dissatisfaction,, as Dong stated, "It's overshadowed by this yellow-face casting of the main actors." The reason behind this

process was that there were none of the Asian-American viable for business as Hollywood claimed.

b. Asian-Americans in present-day Hollywood

After decades, Asian-American actors are finally recognized and play major roles in films. Some of the actors even achieved a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, such as Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Anna Mae Wong. Furthermore, in 2018, the success of *Crazy Rich Asians* brought new hope for Asian Americans. The film, which is dominated by an Asian cast, including the director and the writers, becomes a breakthrough for many Asian Americans because it turned out to be the highest-grossing romantic comedy of the past few years. Yet, some films are still casting their roles racially. This issue has received some critics from fans.

3. Anti-Whitewashing Movement

Anti whitewashing movement is a movement that was born from people's frustration of seeing the dominance of white actors in Hollywood. This movement begins by criticizing movies that are still using whitewashing in selecting their actors. In the film *Ghost in the Shell*, instead of casting Asian-American actors to represent the story of a Japanese anime, they prefer Scarlett Johansson as the main role for this role.

The aims of this campaign are to reduce and demand more diversity in Hollywood. The campaign starts on social media by selecting John Cho as the subject of this movement. John Cho is an Asian American actor who is famous for his play in *Harold and Kumar* series. According to Yu, the creator of the hashtag #StarringJohnCho stated that "The project aimed to demonstrate that Asian-Americans could play any role and demonstrated that characters in films" (2018). This campaign is well-received worldwide, and it has become a trending topic on Facebook, Twitter, and other notable publications. Two years after the campaign, this movement yields a result. John Cho finally plays the leading in *Searching*. With the success of the campaign, Asian American actors are starting to get a chance to be cast for lead roles in films.

The following critics on social media are #OscarsSoWhite. The hashtag was a movement initiated by April Reign with a tweet, "#OscarsSoWhite they asked to touch my hair" in January 2015. The purpose of this movement was to spread awareness about the Oscar-voting Academy since the nominees at that time were 20 actors who were all white. Even though the movement received an unpleasant response, it still uses as a campaign slogan for increasing diversity at the Oscars, in Hollywood, and throughout the entertainment industry ("#OscarsSoWhite: The Hollywood' hashtag' activists demanding diversity").

In brief, the campaigns of anti-whitewashing movements have played a significant role in facilitating favorable transformations in the representation of Asian-Americans within the film industry. Furthermore, this phenomenon serves as evidence that the public is actively supporting the awareness of increased diversity in Hollywood. Moreover, their perspectives are presently gaining recognition on a worldwide level, due to the support provided by social media platforms and advancements in technology.

C. RESEARCH METHOD

This research is a film analysis that focuses on content and representation. It is assumed that films have content and it represents a social world (Flick, 2017, p. 413). Thus, the analysis of film is how content is presented in contributing to producing the meaning. In addition, representation means "production of meaning through language" (Hall, 1997, p. 28). In the context of film, the production of meaning can be found through "images, sounds, writing, language, graphics, and music." (O'Sullivan, 2006, p. 265). The representation that will be discussed in this research is Asian representation in Hollywood films. Thus, this research belongs to film analysis which focuses on content and representation.

The data sources of this research are two films of *Mortal Kombat*. The original version in 1995 was directed by Paul W.S. Anderson, and the remake version, *Mortal Kombat 2021*, was directed by Simon McQuoid. The data in this research are events in both films that show the representation of Asians.

The data are collected by watching the films and taking notes. First, the researchers watch the films repeatedly. Then, taking notes are done by highlighting the events through

the scene in the films that meet the criteria of data to answer the research questions. After data collection, the data are analyzed in several steps.

- (1) Description of data collection. The researchers start the coding process by determining the data for the film analysis: name, race, and role. These categories are needed to describe the differences and similarities between both films in different periods of time. It aims to find out whether the data fall into a whitewashing category or not. The researchers describe the collected data.
- (2) Analysis of data. The data that shows the representation of Asians are discussed with a deeper explanation.
- (3) Then, the analysis is continued by comparing the representation of Asians in both films.
- (4) Presentation of the results. (Mikos in Flick, 2017)

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To answer the questions, the researchers coded two films that follow the same storyline. Since the objective of the study was to determine how Asian representation progressed from the original to the remake, it seemed logical to classify each film to promote better comprehension (see appendix for coding procedure). The researchers evaluate both films in order to provide a thorough analysis of their similarities and differences. This provides a quick summary of the content of both films, including the role of race and character, which contribute to the whitewashing problem that has plagued Hollywood in recent years, and provide a better understanding of the representation portrayed in the original and remake. The researchers discuss Asian characters' roles in both films and how they have evolved or developed over time.

Comparison

Based on the data, *Mortal Kombat* (2021) has more characters than *Mortal Kombat* (1995). The total number of characters in *Mortal Kombat* is 30, 13 in the original and 17 in the remake version. In the original, three were Asians, nine white, and one black. The remake starred eight Asians, seven white, and two black. It is essential to realize the equality in numbers of racial representation in these films because the purpose was to tear down the

racial barriers that have been created in Hollywood. To conclude, equal representation in numbers was the first move by *Mortal Kombat* (2021) to bring proper representation, originality, and equality.

In the following part of the coding material, the researchers analyzed the roles of the characters and relate them to whitewashing in both films. Whitewashing in the original was not blatantly shown. However, the fact that it existed in the original version is necessary to illustrate the form of whitewashing which appeared in *Mortal Kombat* (1995).

First, the character of Lord Ryden. In the original story (*Mortal Kombat Game*), Lord Rayden was a Japanese thunder god. However, instead of casting an Asian actor for this role, they decided to put Christopher Lambert on screen while the god of thunder was originally intended to be depicted as Japanese. This action received some critics, one of which was from Brooks (qt. In Wasserman) "the Japanese thunder god from the 90s was a man named Christopher Lambert. He is not Japanese. He's a fantastic actor, but what we've done in Hollywood for way too long is help America launder its own bigotry."



(Fig.1. The first appearance of Lord Rayden in *Mortal Kombat* (1995))

Different from its original version, the remake version of *Mortal Kombat* offered more diversity in selecting actors. McQuoid, the director of *Mortal Kombat 2021*, stated the reason why *Mortal Kombat* is popular. It is because of its characters and his hard work over three years to develop the film, specifically in selecting their actors. Moreover, he believed that it is essential to inform the audience of whom they cast in order to make the characters feel really genuine (qt in *A Journey to The Outworld: On the Set Of 'Mortal Kombat'*). As a result, the role of Lord Rayden was given to Asian actor Tadanobu Asano. It shows that the remake version of *Mortal Kombat* was careful with the characters' origins.



(Fig.2. The first appearance of Lord Rayden in Mortal Kombat (2021))

Second, the following whitewash character is Scorpion. In the original version of *Mortal Kombat*, the role of Scorpion was played by a white actor. This character appeared with a ninja costume that almost covered his body and face, except his eyes. However, during the film, he never took off his mask, but it was clear that the person in that costume was not Asian. Despite the costume and the character's origin, this role did not have any background story, no introduction, and no dialogue. To conclude, the character of Scorpion, which was supposed to be one of the most important characters of the story, was not properly portrayed in *Mortal Kombat* (1995).



(Fig.3. Scorpion/Hanzo in Mortal Kombat (2021))

In comparison, the remake version of this *Mortal Kombat* offers a more authentic story of Scorpion, and it relays the lore which was told in the game version of these films. The story begins with the appearance of Hanzo's family, which is set in Japan around (1965). Hanzo was a ninja from the Shirai Ryu clan who believed his heir would become the chosen one, a champion who prevented Outworld's victory. He appeared in most scenes, and he spoke the Japanese language. Furthermore, Scorpion is one of the main characters of *Mortal Kombat* since the story revolves around him. In this film, this character was played

by an Asian-American actor who is skillful in martial art. It showed that the *Mortal Kombat* remake has removed whitewashing in casting the role of Scorpion.



(Fig.4. Scorpion/Hanzo in Mortal Kombat (2021).

Another character who had comparable whitewashing terms is Sub-Zero. Sub-Zero was a villain from the Chinese assassin Lin Kuei clan in both films. Furthermore, Sub-Zero is described as an assassin with a powerful ability to transform ice into his weapon. Obviously, to show originality in this character representation, Asian actors should be given a chance to play this role. However, in this version, the character of Sub-Zero was played by a white actor.



(Fig.3. Sub-Zero in Mortal Kombat (1995)

The last character that has evolved from the original to the remake is Sub-Zero. To fully remove all of the whitewashed characters, the remake version of Mortal Kombat selected an Asian actor to play this role.



(Fig.3. Sub-Zero in *Mortal Kombat* (2021)).

In this discussion, the researchers relate the representation in these films to anti whitewashing movement and its effect in Hollywood. To answer the questions of the research, it is important to observe these films from their perspective of historical context. Before 1995, racist barriers started in Hollywood. In telling a story of minorities, they selected white actors by using yellowface, which transformed white actors into Asian characters. After decades, even though yellowface has no longer the problem, they are using different ways to represent Asians, which is whitewashing. Therefore, Asian actors were not given a chance to represent themselves for a long time. To conclude, it is obvious that *Mortal Kombat* (1995) is also included in whitewashing practice.

One of the reasons behind the whitewashing practice is that many believe that using non-white actors will cost a fortune and will not be profitable for the industry. However, in 1990, the earliest protest of yellowface was started, and a national campaign was led by Asian-American activists to criticize yellowface in Miss Saigon. In 2013, another protest occurred against The Mikado Production for constantly casting white actors for its Japanese roles. Later in 2018, the protests against anti-whitewashing continued in the digital sphere with hashtags that demanded diversity and visibility of Asian Americans on a big screen. In response to this, many white actors decided to refuse to participate in whitewashing practices. Related to the previous explanation, after evaluating both films through content analysis. The most obvious progress from the *Mortal Kombat* original and remake is the removal of whitewashing practices in casting their actors. The original version has three whitewashed characters; Lord Rayden, Scorpion, and Sub-zero, while in the remake version of *Mortal Kombat*, there were no whitewashed characters.

The researchers realized that these films are mirrors of their time and attempt to reflect the history and culture in which they were created. Even though the representations of these films maybe not be completely accurate, they raise awareness of important social issues regarding certain races that still affect society today. Furthermore, the representation of Asians in these films has changed due to the anti-whitewashing movement. To conclude, *Mortal Kombat 2015* provides historically accurate evidence about the presence of whitewashing in films, while *Mortal Kombat 2021* provides a better portrayal of Asian characters and a more authentic story.

E. CONCLUSION

The problem of whitewashing has troubled Hollywood for decades. In the casting industry, opportunities for Asian actors and actresses were limited. This form of racial discrimination in casting has become one of the contributing factors to Hollywood's lack of diversity. However, the anti-whitewashing movement has made a contribution to equality. It is evident from the research that the anti-whitewashing movement influenced the film industry and increased the opportunities for Asian actors and actresses to have roles in Hollywood films. In conclusion, the movement has had a positive influence on film representations, though it is difficult to prove cause and effect. The comparison between the original and remake of *Mortal Kombat* shows the advancement and shift in Asian representation in Hollywood.

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