

20 IN DEPTH

American pop culture bridges Sino-US gap

In July, the first Chinese Superman will appear, the latest example by producers of American pop culture to feature Chinese and Chinese-American characters, in response to growing market demand, reports Amy He in New York.

The name isn't Clark Kent. It's Kenan Kong, and in July DC Comics will introduce the 17-year-old from Shanghai as its Chinese Superman.

Written by Chinese-American novelist Gene Luen Yang and illustrated by Victor Bogdanovic, the comic book's story line will be set in China, and will attempt to tackle issues of race and identity, as well as explore the interdependent relationship between China and the United States, according to Yang.

The comic book - *New Super-Man* - will be sold in July at US retailers for \$2.99 and be available for digital downloading. It is the latest effort by producers of American pop culture to feature Chinese and Chinese-American characters.

ABC-TV's *Fresh Off the Boat* series about a Chinese-American immigrant family made major headlines when it premiered in 2015. AMC premiered its new fantasy series *Into the Badlands* later that same year, starring Daniel Wu as its protagonist in a dystopian future.

Marvel Comics' television show *Agents of Shield* features Ming-Na Wen and a lead played by Chloe Bennett, who is half-Chinese. Netflix, the content streaming giant, recently released three productions featuring Chinese or Chinese-American actors - *Master of None*, *Marco Polo* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Sword of Destiny*.



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What's behind the increase in Chinese characters and stories in US television shows, movies and other entertainment venues?

Is it a slow step toward making up for a lack of representation? Is it the influence of China and its big investments in Hollywood and other entertainment industries, making US media executives feel the need to have Chinese faces in projects?

"I think it's probably both factors," said Brian Hu, artistic director of the Pacific Arts Movement, a San Diego, California-based arts organization that focuses on Asian and Asian-American cinema. "I think the China factor is that it's just more in the air now. In Hollywood they're talking about China more, and a residual effect of that might be that Asian faces are not necessarily considered lethal or box office poison. They talk about China enough so that it seems like it's potentially okay."

Representation at peak

Chinese and Asian representation in American pop culture is at an all-time high.

In March, ABC's *Fresh Off the Boat* got renewed for a third season, making it the longest-running sitcom to feature a predominantly Asian cast. ABC's debut of the show marked the first time an Asian family was on a major television network.

It was also the first sitcom to feature an Asian-American family since Korean-American comedian Margaret Cho's *All American Girl*, which debuted on ABC in 1994 and was canceled after six months.

AMC, the channel that broadcast *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men*, renewed its Asian-led *Into the Badlands* for a second season. Lucy Liu, perhaps one of the most well-known Chinese-American actresses, has been starring as Watson on CBS-TV's Sherlock Holmes' adaptation *Elementary*, since 2012.

ABC's new Sunday-night drama *Quantico* is led by an Indian actress and has been picked up for a second season, while its freshmen Friday night sitcom *Dr. Ken* features a second-generation Asian-American family that stars a Korean-American and Japanese-American actress as leads.

Entertainment industry observers said that those roles fit into the broader context of a growing pan-Asian representation in American media. For the first time the percentage of Asian characters in US media roughly equaled the percentage of the Asian population in the US, according to a study from the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. About 5.1 percent of characters on TV and in films released between Sept 2014 and August 2015 were Asian.

At the end of March, CBS-TV launched a



The New Super-Man will be a Chinese teen from Shanghai named Kenan Kong, making it the first time that Superman is Asian. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY BY DC ENTERTAINMENT

Why the name change for the New Super-Man

Kenan Kong is the name of the new Chinese Superman, but his original name sounded more Japanese and offended some comic book fans.

The original name was Kenji Kong. The writer for the new series, Chinese-American Gene Luen Yang, explained on DC Comics' blog that the Chinese words "ken" and "ji" together loosely connote earnest remembrance, which "lies at the very heart of the protagonist's arc" and could function as a plot point.

But the problem was that Kenji is a common Japanese name, though Yang wrote that it wasn't entirely unheard of for a Chinese person to have the name. He cited a pop star in Taiwan who goes by Kenji Wu. Furthermore, the ambiguity in the name could provide him with a conflict he could explore in the new comics, Yang said.

"Maybe New Super-Man starts off with a bias against Japanese people and the Pinyin version of his name bugs him to no end. Maybe his friends make fun of it," he wrote. "Maybe he eventually has to team

up with a Japanese super hero, someone like Katana or a member of that crazy Japanese super-team that Grant Morrison made up. Maybe they fall in love."

But some readers said on Internet forums that the name was an odd choice, given the sometimes tense relations between China and Japan.

Yang told China Daily that if this were a character in one of his own novels, he could have potentially gone with Kenji Kong, but because this was an iconic character in the DC lineup, he reconsidered the name.

"Even D-list DC characters have iconic value, so it's something I was careful about when I was first working on the character and that's why we made that change," Yang said. Ultimately he went with Kenan Kong, with the character "ke" meaning "to overcome" and "nan" meaning "South" - this hero is Shanghaiese, who people in Beijing like to call southerners.

And "what could be more Superman than 'to overcome'?" Yang wrote.

—AMY HE

remake of the *Rush Hour* film franchise that originally starred Jackie Chan and Chris Tucker.

Netflix's *Master of None*, created by Aziz Ansari, focuses heavily on what it means to be children of immigrant parents, with one episode spotlighting an Indian-American and Chinese-American character's parents and their experiences coming to the US and adapting to American culture.

"I think especially television has seen a drastic improvement in representation for Asian Americans, especially in leading roles," said Mike Le, a writer at Racebending, an entertainment and advocacy site that covers underrepresented groups in the media. "As a medium, television tends to be more reactive to the needs of the market. There are smaller budgets and less perceived risk, a wider variety of shows vying for audience share, and more experimentation with funding and broadcast and streaming methods."

With *Into the Badlands*, Wu's star power in China and capacity as executive producer, helped AMC secure an international distributor in Asia that allowed the show to be broadcast in the US and Asia simultaneously. The show was licensed to Letv in China and AMC Global through the rest of Asia, according to trade *Variety*.

Although Wu's lead status on the show is "absolutely groundbreaking", his character is still a martial artist and the series is still billed as a martial arts series, said Le,

referring to the martial arts genre as one of few in which American executives are comfortable casting Asian actors.

"There's a litany of shows where the stereotypes are still there that don't seem to be easily tamed. You have Daniel Wu as a martial artist. That seems now somewhat trite, but it continues to be an easy way of casting decisions," said Robert Lee, who teaches Asian-American history and culture at Brown University.

As for Hollywood, it is increasingly focused on global revenue and Chinese and Chinese-American actors are less prevalent.

"I think [studio executives] are thinking principally of the larger global market. So whether or not it's the Chinese market or the Asian market generally, I think that's a distinct sort of calculus than thinking about the Asian-American market per se," said Lee.

"I think certainly the fact that the Chinese movie market is likely to become the largest global market for American movies is significant. The top 10 box office revenue producers made more money in China than they did in the United States," he said.

Chinese and Chinese-American actors mostly show up in minor movie roles with large casts. Actress Fan Bingbing played a minor role in *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, and also appeared in the third *Iron Man* movie, though the latter role was only included in a scene available in the movie released in China. Actress Zhang Jingchu appeared



briefly in the fifth installment of *Mission Impossible* starring Tom Cruise.

Her *Mission Impossible* appearance was met with backlash. Her casting was initially announced as "a major role" in the film, but Zhang played a CIA analyst who had no more than several minutes of screen time. Many attributed her involvement in the film to it having a major Chinese backer - e-commerce giant Alibaba.

"What you have are more and more famous Chinese faces and stars in these American productions, but only for three seconds. They still want to keep [the movie] kind of white, but they want the Chinese to back with money," said Long Bui, a professor of American studies at Wesleyan University.

"So in a weird sense, Chinese financiers and producers have more say in Hollywood now, but that doesn't mean that Hollywood is going to comply and actually incorporate more Asian bodies and people. It's like a tacit assessment of China's power, but not necessarily multiculturalism," he said.

Despite producing some of the most recognizable actors and stories consumed by audiences around the world, Hollywood has had a troubled history with the casting of Asian actors in roles that aren't racist or stereotypical.

The oft-cited example of Mickey Rooney as a Japanese man in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is one of many instances of "yellowface" in Hollywood, the practice of putting makeup on white actors to make them look Asian for roles. In the 1937 movie adaptation of Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*, two white actors were cast as Chinese farmers in a story about their struggle to survive.

The portrayal of Asians as villains was also popular in early Hollywood, and continues to be prevalent in movies and television shows today. Early in the 20th century, Hollywood responded to people's fears of "Yellow Peril" - a xenophobic perception that the East posed a threat to Americans.

John Dower, an American history professor, wrote that the fear "derived not from concern with any one country or people in particular" but from a "vague and ominous sense of the vast, faceless, nameless yellow horde: the rising tide, indeed, of color."

Dr. Fu Manchu

The image most associated with the Yellow Peril is Dr. Fu Manchu - a cunning genius introduced in the early 1900s. The Fu Manchu character was smart, but used his intelligence to plot murders and commit crimes, participating in the drug trade and trafficking white slaves. He was described as having a "face like Satan" and was portrayed as having a mustache that many now refer to as the Fu Manchu mustache. But even then, in movies only white actors like Christopher Lee and Nicolas Cage played Fu.

Today, yellow face and obvious stereotypes like Fu Manchu have fallen out of favor, though whitewashing is still a persistent issue, where studios will often cast white actors for Asian roles. With the rise of social media, problematic casting issues have been criticized quickly, leading to further conversations about the place of Asians in American pop culture.

Last year, white American actress Emma Stone was cast as a US Air Force pilot in Cameron Crowe's movie *Aloha* as Allison Ng, who is half-Chinese and one quarter Hawaiian. Criticism for casting a caucasian actress for a part-Asian character led Crowe to apologize for the casting choice.

Most recently, initial stills were released from an upcoming American remake of the Japanese story *Ghost in the Shell*, which stars Scarlett Johansson as a Japanese character. Fans of the original manga were upset that the character was being played by a Caucasian actress. Director Max Landis defended the casting choice, saying that there are no

A-list Asian actresses who can sell the movie.

"Whitewashing is really pointing out that Hollywood doesn't see Asian Americans as leads, to the extreme where even Asian characters are not being played by Asian actors," said Biola's Yuen. "I think conceptually they just don't think that Asian Americans can carry a film or a show. But that's from their limited perspective - that's from a Western perspective, from a white perspective, really."

"I think there are plenty of movies that star white stars that are A-list - for example *The Huntsman*, it just totally flopped at the box office, and that had three major white stars that you would say are A-list," she said, referring to the newly released film starring Chris Hemsworth, Charlize Theron and Jessica Chastain.

"I think that they see people of color as representing all of their race, whereas for example with *The Huntsman*, people are saying it's because Kristen Stewart wasn't in the film, not because white people can't carry a film. They have individual level explanations for failed white films, but they have generalized, racialized explanations for films that fail when they feature Asian American actor or an actor of color," she said.

Some say that despite the introduction of a Chinese Superman into comics, studios might rush to bring it to the big screen because audiences may not welcome a non-white Superman, a character who has had such important cultural cache in America.

"Things can change on one hand, and still be [the same] on the other. Unfortunately the world doesn't just move forward progressively altogether. While there can be improvement in some areas, other areas may still be the same or worse. That's the cynical perspective, but I think the fact that there is an increasing representation of Asian Americans in American media is an improvement," said Aynne Kokas, media professor at the University of Virginia. "I think there are still serious blind spots and there's also progress happening at the same time."

With the new Chinese Superman, novelist Yang said that there was immense interest at DC to expand the Superman family and to explore the universal traits of the character within the context of Chinese culture.

He told China Daily that he wants to approach the story as an outsider to Chinese culture, and explore the relationship between China and the US, which he thinks is one of interdependency, despite depictions of the two countries as rivals.

The story line

Yang said that the story of the New Super-Man will explore how he inherited his Superman powers and his upbringing in China.

"I also think that as a Chinese American, within myself there's a dialogue between Eastern and Western values. I think that dialogue is actually happening both on the American and the Chinese side. There's a lot of talk about how do we take the best from the East and the West and integrate it into something whole," said Yang, who grew up in California and is most known for his graphic novel *American Born Chinese*.

Yang said that he has visited China two times and is doing research on China in preparation for writing the new comic strip.

Some feel that DC's introduction of a Chinese iteration of such an iconic American character is no coincidence because live-action adaptations of comic books have brought in major revenue for movie studios. Many of these comic genre movies have done well at the Chinese box office as well.

Nancy Wang Yuen, a scholar on race and ethnicity in Hollywood, said that character may have to do with considerations of the potential Chinese market, citing Yang's trepidation in writing about a place that he has visited a couple of times in his life.

"I think that if it were just to increase the representation of Asian Americans, the character would have been set in the United States and written as an American," she said.

"It's actually smart of DC to capitalize on both the Chinese and US markets given that the comic series will be written in English and that the Superman story has always centered on an immigrant experience, which will speak to the American audiences of color more. But by setting it in Shanghai, it can reach the Chinese market," added Yuen, who is also a professor of sociology at Biola University in California.

Yang said that he has not been involved in discussions about marketing the new comic book, and DC Comics said it could not comment on any film initiatives.

Kokas suggested that there are even discussions about a Chinese superhero because there may be potential to sell him to a Chinese market suggests that a lot of the motivations aren't because people are just all of a sudden now interested in representing more communities, and that it may be for more financial reasons.

"So it's an improvement, but for what reason?"

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