

Asian American Society: An Encyclopedia

Actors, Asian American

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[Caption text coded in XML from Captions document]

Asian American actors are underrepresented in Hollywood. According to a 2008 report by the Screen Actor's Guild, Asian American actors played 3.8 percent of all film and TV roles—1.8 percent below their U.S. population of 5.6 percent. Asian American actors also confront stereotyped roles like exotic villains, dragon ladies, martial artists, and nerds. Nonetheless, Asian American actors manage to give memorable performances and to create alternative forms of self-expression.

Perils of Yellowface and Early Pioneers

Though Asians were subjects for Hollywood films as early as 1896, white actors played the first Asian characters. In yellowface, white actors put on wigs, makeup, and eye prosthetics while speaking in broken English. White actors played some of the most famous Asians in Hollywood—Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan. Etched into U.S. popular culture, these archetypes continue to shape how Hollywood casts Asian American actors.

Sessue Hayakawa, a pioneer Asian American actor in the silent film era, was typecast as a sadistic Asian villain (most famous in *The Cheat*, 1915). Nonetheless, he was a popular matinee idol and received an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor as the honorable villain, Colonel Saito, in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957).

Another pioneer was Anna May Wong, who starred in more than 50 movies between 1919 and 1960—most famous in *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924), *Old San Francisco* (1927), and *Shanghai Express* (1932). Unhappy with playing mainly dragon ladies or

submissive victims, Wong screen tested for the lead role of O-Lan in *The Good Earth* (1937) but lost to German actor Luise Rainer (who won an Academy Award for her performance). Years later, Wong returned to Hollywood as the first Asian American actor to star in a television show in *The Gallery of Madame Liu Tsong* (1951).

Representing Asian America

Flower Drum Song (1961) was the first commercial musical film to exclusively feature Asian Americans acting, singing, and dancing. Miyoshi Umeki, the first Asian American actor to win an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress (in the film *Sayonara*, 1957), played Mei Li. Nancy Kwan, who made her acting debut as the title character in *The World of Suzy Wong* (1960), played lounge singer Linda Low. James Shigeta, one of the only Asian American male romantic leads of his time, played Wang Ta. In the documentary *The Slanted Screen* (2006), Shigeta recalls a musical film producer telling him, "If you were white, you'd be a hell of a big star."

The Joy Luck Club (1993), directed by Asian American filmmaker Wayne Wang, also featured an all-Asian cast. Based on Amy Tan's best-selling book, the film tells the story of four Chinese immigrant mothers and their U.S.-born daughters. Ming-Na, who played June, went on to voice the title character in Disney's *Mulan* (1998) and was a series regular on NBC's medical drama *ER* and SyFy Network's *Stargate Universe*. She was also the first Asian actor to receive a contract role for a daytime drama on CBS's *As the World Turns*. Tamlyn Tomita, who made her film debut in *The Karate Kid Part II* (1986), played Waverly. Additional Asian American actors in *The Joy Luck Club* include Rosalind Chao and Lauren Tom, as daughters, and Tsai Chin, Kieu Chinh, Lisa Lu, and France Nuyen, as mothers.

The first television situation comedy featuring an Asian American family was the short-lived [p. 18 ↓] *All-American Girl* (1994), starring comedian Margaret Cho. The show was about a Korean American family, loosely based on Cho's own life. Cho later revealed that, while working on the show, she was criticized for not being Asian enough. After several comedy tours, Cho returned to television in 2008 on VH1's reality sitcom, *The Cho Show*. Cho was nominated for a Primetime Emmy for guest starring as gender-bending North Korean leader Kim Jong Il on *30 Rock* (NBC). Other members of

the *All-American Girl* cast include Amy Hill as Cho's grandmother, Jodi Long as Cho's mother, Clyde Kusatsu as Cho's father, and B. D. Wong as Cho's older brother. Long played another Asian immigrant mother on TBS's *Sullivan and Sons*, starring Asian American comedian Steve Byrne.

East West Players and Theater

Frustrated over the lack of opportunities for actors of color and the abundance of stereotyped roles, Asian American actors and artists have formed theater companies around the country. The first, East West Players, was founded 1965 in Los Angeles, California, by seven Asian American actors: Mako, James Hong, Beulah Quo, Pat Li, June Kim, Guy Lee, and Yet Lock. Its first artistic director, Mako, went on to receive an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor for his role as Po-Han in *The Sand Pebbles* (1966).

B. D. Wong began his career on stage starring as Son Liling in David Henry Hwang's play, *M. Butterfly*, winning multiple accolades (including the Tony Award in 1988). John Lone reprised the role for the film version of *M. Butterfly* (1993). Lone also starred in *The Last Emperor* (1987) along with Joan Chen, Victor Wong, and Dennis Dun. Lone received a Best Actor Academy Award nomination for his role as Emperor Pu Yi. Tony-award winner and actor and singer Lea Salonga played Kim in the Broadway musical *Miss Saigon*. She also starred in the Broadway musical *Les Misérables*. In films, Salonga was the singing voice for Jasmine in *Aladdin* (1992) and Fa Mulan in *Mulan* (1998).

Enter the Dragon and Beyond

Bruce Lee, arguably one of the most famous Asian American icons, both broke and created stereotypes. In his roles, Lee displayed a virile masculinity that was simultaneously empowering and savage. Son of a Cantonese Opera star, Lee began performing at a young age. Lee played Japanese houseboy and chauffeur Kato on the television series *The Green Hornet* (1966–67) along with other minor television roles.

Kung Fu (1972–75) was Lee's chance to star in his own series, but he lost the role to white actor David Carradine.

Lee's rejection propelled him to leave for Hong Kong to star in films like *Fist of Fury* (1972) and *Return of the Dragon* (1972), which Lee also wrote and produced. His final film, *Enter the Dragon* (1973), was the first English-language martial arts film produced by a major U.S. studio in Hong Kong. Though Lee's life ended when he was only 32 years old, his martial arts legacy lives on. Bruce Lee's life was the inspiration for the film *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* (1993), starring Jason Scott Lee.

The Karate Kid (1984) and its sequel featured Pat Morita as a martial arts master. For his role as Mr. Miyagi, Morita received an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor. Morita started as Arnold on television's *Happy Days*. Morita also played the leads in two short-lived television series—*Mr. T and Tina* (1976) and *Ohara* (1987–88).

Lucy Liu performed martial arts as a heroine in *Charlie's Angels* (2000) and a villain in the *Kill Bill* films (2003, 2004). Liu was first recognized for playing Ling Woo, a cold, calculating, and sexually provocative attorney on FOX's *Ally MacBeal*, for which she received a prime-time Emmy nomination. Most recently, Liu defied racial and gender tradition by playing Dr. Joan Watson in a reimaged Sherlock Holmes series, CBS's *Elementary*.

Other martial arts performers include Dennis Dun in the cult film *Big Trouble in Little China* (1986); Philip Rhee, who directed, produced, and acted in the martial arts films *Best of the Best* (1989, 1993, 1995, 1998); and Brandon Lee, Bruce Lee's son, in *The Crow* (1994). Russell Wong, Chi Muoi Lo, and Haing S. Ngor starred in a brief martial arts television series *Vanishing Son*. Ngor became the second Asian American actor to win an Academy Award when he got Best Supporting Actor for his performance in *The Killing Fields* (1984). Cary-Hirokyu Tagawa played a martial arts villain in *Mortal Kombat* (1995). Maggie Q played Nikita, the martial-arts-wielding, femme fatale character in CW's *Nikita*.

Despite the successes of prominent actors such as Lucy Liu, seen here in 2012, Asian American actors remain underrepresented in American film and TV. Asians played only

3.8 percent of all Hollywood film and TV roles despite making up 5.6 percent of the U.S. population in 2008.



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The Final Frontier: Science Fiction and Fantasy

Many Asian American actors gained success in the genre of science fiction (sci-fi) and fantasy. George Takei played Sulu, the first major Asian American role in sci-fi television. Takei starred in the original *Star Trek* television series and six *Star Trek* feature films. John Cho played Sulu in the rebooted *Star Trek* films (2009, 2013). Other Asian American actors who were *Star Trek* regulars include Rosalind Chao (*Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*), Garrett Wang (*Star Trek: Voyager*), and Linda Park (*Star Trek: Enterprise*).

In other sci-fi and fantasy television, Dean Cain starred as Superman in ABC's *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*, while Kristin Kreuk starred as Lana Lang in the Superman-inspired series *Smallville*. Grace Park gained recognition on *Battlestar Galactica*. ABC's *Lost* starred actors Daniel Dae Kim and Yunjin Kim as a married Korean couple, Ken Leung as a bounty hunter, and Naveen Andrews as a former Iraqi guard. James Kyson Lee, Masi Oka, and Sendhil Ramamurthy played super-powered characters in NBC's *Heroes*. SyFy Network's *Stargate Universe* featured Ming Na and Lou Diamond Phillips, who began his career starring as Richie Valens in *La Bamba* (1987). Jamie Chung played Mulan in ABC's *Once Upon a Time*. Steven Yeun played Glenn, an everyman hero on AMC's apocalyptic series *The Walking Dead*.

In fantasy films, James Hong played an eye manufacturer in *Blade Runner* (1982) and a sorcerer in *Big Trouble in Little China* (1986). Dante Basco played Rufio in the Peter Pan-inspired *Hook* (1991) and Kelly Hu played a sorceress in *The Scorpion King* (2002).

Other Roles

Many Asian American actors play doctors on television. They include Ming-Na on NBC's *ER*, Kal Penn and Charlyne Yi on FOX's *House*, B.D. Wong's forensic psychiatrist on NBC's *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, and actor, comedian, and writer Mindy Kaling's obstetrician and gynecologist in her own sitcom, FOX's *The Mindy Project*. Kaling was also an actor and writer for NBC's *The Office*.

Sandra Oh played Dr. Cristina Yang on ABC's medical drama *Grey's Anatomy*, for which she won Golden Globe and Screen Actors Guild (SAG) Awards (2006). Oh began her career in Canada, winning two Genie Awards before coming to Hollywood. In her SAG award acceptance speech, Oh said:

I'm really proud to be on a show whose casting is a little more representative of how I think the world is. So to all my fellow Asian American actors out there, I share this with you. Be encouraged and keep shining.

Asian American actors also play law enforcement characters on popular procedural crime dramas: Aya Sumika on CBS's *Numb3rs*, Sonja Sohn on HBO's *The Wire* and ABC's *Body of Proof*, Michael Paul Chan on TBS's *The Closer*, [p. 20 ↓] C. S. Lee on Showtime's *Dexter*, Daniel Dae Kim and Grace Park on CBS's rebooted *Hawaii Five-O*, and Reggie Lee on NBC's fantasy procedural *Grimm*.

While Gary Watanabe's character, Long Duk Dong, in *Sixteen Candles* (1984) made the Asian nerd a Hollywood fixture, other Asian American actors have turned the stereotype on its head. For example, Karin Anna Cheung, John Cho, Roger Fan, Sung Kang, Parry Shen, and Jason Tobin played a bunch of nerds-turned-misfits in Asian American filmmaker Justin Lin's breakout independent film *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002). Sung Kang went on to reprise his streetwise character Han in Justin Lin's *Fast Five* films (2006, 2009, 2011, 2013).

John Cho began his career playing complex roles in Asian American independent films. Before *Better Luck Tomorrow*, Cho starred in *Shopping for Fangs* (1997) and

Yellow (1998). Cho is best known for playing stoner-nerd Harold in three *Harold and Kumar* films (2004, 2008, 2011). Kal Penn played Harold's partner in crime, Kumar, who purposefully botches his medical school interview in order to get high. Penn also played the lead in *The Namesake* (2006). Before there was *Harold and Kumar*, there were the original comedic stoner duo films *Cheech and Chong*, with Chong played by Tommy Chong.

Asian American actors played a range of anti-nerds, from popular kids to cool geeks. They include Mark-Paul Gosselaar as the lead Zack Morris on NBC's *Saved by the Bell*, Keiko Agena as a rocker teen on WB's *Gilmore Girls*, Vanessa Anne Hudgens as the female lead in the *High School Musical* films, and Brenda Song as spoiled hotel heiress London Tipton on Disney Channel's *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* and its spin-off *The Suite Life on Deck*. FOX's *Glee* featured three musically talented high school characters played by Darren Criss, Harry Shum, Jr., and Jenna Ushkowitz. Ken Jeong and Danny Pudi played eccentric community college students in NBC's *Community*. Actor and comedian Bobby Lee exploded Asian stereotypes in sketches like "Average Asian" on FOX's *MADtv*.

Generation YouTube

A new generation of Asian American performers have found a voice and millions of fans on the democratized platform of YouTube. Ryan Higa and Kevin Wu (Kev Jumba) have two of the highest subscribed channels on YouTube. They create, film, and star in weekly sketch comedies, music videos, and video blogs (vlogs) that they load onto the Internet, sidestepping Hollywood all together.

In a June 2012 *Los Angeles Times* interview, Ryan Higa described how YouTube empowers Asian American performers:

It's not a bunch of kung fu shows or Asian cooking shows.... It's every show you would normally see on any other network. It just so happens that there are Asians in it, and it's not weird. We're playing roles that we want to play, not roles that we're supposed to play.

Though Asian American actors have experienced exclusion and stereotyping in Hollywood, they continue to persevere and reinvent themselves through artistry, roles in independent films, and original YouTube shows.

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See Also:

- [2000 to 2013 Primary Documents](#)
- [Better Luck Tomorrow](#)
- [East West Players](#)
- [Film, Asian American](#)
- [Harold and Kumar Films](#)
- [Penn, Kal](#)
- [Plays and Playwrights](#)
- [Stereotypes: Dragon Lady or Docile](#)
- [Television, Asian Americans and](#)
- [YouTube Performers](#)

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