Hollywood's China

China in the Eyes of America's Twentieth Century Youth

Written By
Allison Michelle Morris

Mills College

Spring 2011

This critical analysis will attempt to identify and address the stereotypical roles relegated to Chinese and Chinese American characters and actors in twentieth-century media marketed for children. This analysis focuses on the animated short "Harem Scarem" (1928), the film The Mask of Fu Manchu (1932), the graphic novel "Tintin and the Blue Lotus" (1936), and "The Nutcracker Suite from the film Fantasia (1940).

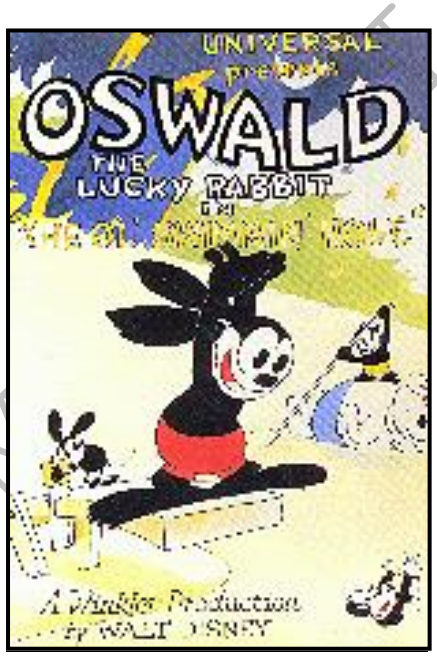
Hollywood's China:
China in the Eyes of America's Twentieth Century Youth

In 1924, Anna May Wong appeared on the silver screen as the first Asian actor in a prominent film role. She did not speak, but in an instant, Hollywood was captivated by her exotic beauty and distinctive "Otherness," the definitive start of a long history of stereotypical representations of Chinese and Chinese American characters in film and other forms of popular media. While representations are often noted in "Adult Films," such stereotypical representations are also highly prevalent in children's entertainment, and distinctly correlate with the social conditions between China and the United States. However, the major differences between these two media distinctions is the fact that images in children's entertainment are often excused "because it's just child's play."

CHILDREN'S ENTERTAINMENT: THE BEGINNINGS

According to cultural anthropologist Dr. William O'Barr, the understanding of "childhood" in Western cultures was not fully developed until the twentieth century, concurrently with the development of Hollywood. Prior to the twentieth century, children were viewed as "little adults" who bore the same responsibilities as their parents, despite their young age. However, thanks to unions and child labor laws, American children had more leisure time in the early part of the century then they had ever had in history. With this sudden newfound leisure time, more and more children were going to the cinema, which had previously been a pastime reserved for adults. Despite the financial burdens of the Great Depression, going to the movies was a relatively inexpensive way to spend free time, while also acting as a childcare option of sorts for working parents.

Iconic animated shorts featuring characters like "Oswald the Lucky Rabbit" – and later "Mickey Mouse" – in the 1920s and 1930s were just the beginning of "children's entertainment." Shorts like "Harem Scarem" were modeled after the exotic villainess in *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924, played by Anna May Wong), which showed women as objects of desire as well as an obligation for the male protagonist. By the time Disney had become firmly established industry leaders in children's entertainment with 1937's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, stereotypes of several groups had been set, including those for Asians and Asian-Americans. These stereotypes became part of the social consciousness, as well as set the standard for future "children's" releases.



"Harem Scarem"

Although the original short "Harem Scarem" is allegedly lost, it is the earliest example of children's entertainment in American cinema that demonstrates a clear relationship to Chinese stereotypes common in Hollywood. As previously noted, "Harem Scarem" is heavily influenced by *The Thief of Bagdad*, particularly in the visual representation of Oswald's love interested, the exotic dancer the "Shimmy Queen." The basic plot of the animated short is that Oswald is on holiday in

"Arabia," and becomes attracted to the Shimmy Queen. However, as Oswald does so, the evil Pete becomes attracted to her as well, and kidnaps her. As par his duty, Oswald, symbolizing the West, saves the Shimmy Queen, who symbolizes the East, from Pete's clutches. This animated short indicates Hollywood's early fascination with the Orient, in this case expressed through Arabia, and the emerging image of the "Dragon Lady" stereotype (*American Masters: Hollywood Chinese*).

> "Dragon Lady" refers to an Asian woman who is perceived as seductive, desirable but at the time she is untrustworthy. Movies from the early century have been successful in portraying this stereotypical version of the Asian woman… Scheming, treacherous and dangerous, the Dragon Lady is the female version of the Asian bad guy, only with a slightly different approach to defeat her enemies. She has the power to hypnotize her male rivals, gains trust by seducing them, and when they least expect it, she gets rid of them through sabotage or backstabbing. (*Slaying the Dragon*)

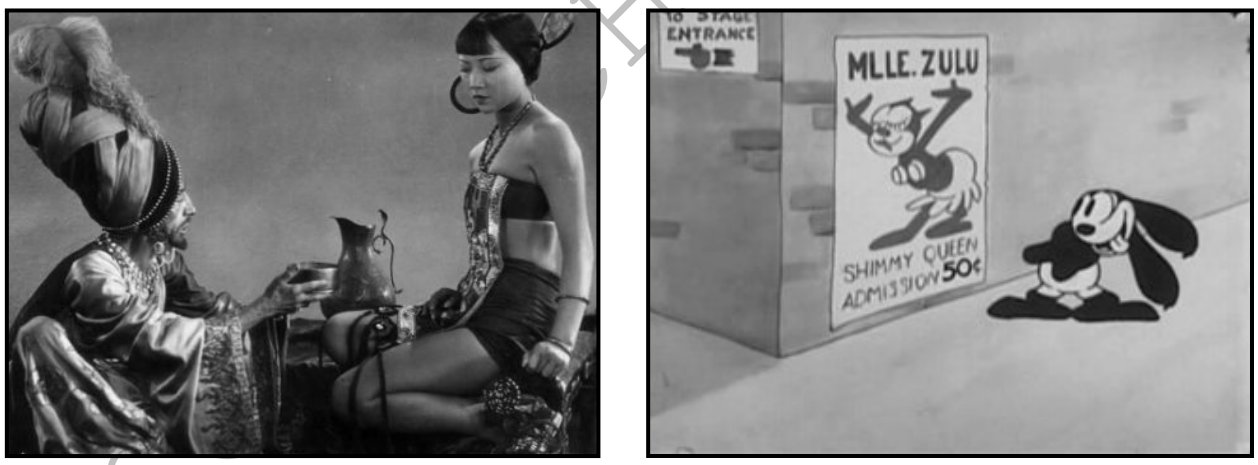


Figure 1: (LEFT) Anna May Wong in the Thief of Bagdad as the "Mongol Slave." (RIGHT) Oswald finds a poster of the "Shimmy Queen" in "Harem Scarem." Between these two screenshots, one can see a resemblance between the two female characters, such as through their exaggeratedly slanted eyes, bandeau tops and short skirts, sexualizing these characters and perpetuating the early "Dragon Lady" stereotype.

In 1928, when "Harem Scarem" was released, China was still, in general, a mystery to the United States, as the country was not an ally nor did it offer any trading opportunities America could not find elsewhere, like Japan for example. However, there was massive conflict and tension

building in China during this time. The "White Terror"[1] was sweeping though the country[2] and the Japanese took advantage of the confusion to begin their infiltration of China through Manchuria. In June, a train carrying Zhang Zuolin[3] was equipped with a bomb set by a Japanese Guandong Army officer; with Zhang's death, the gradually collapsing Manchurian government was more vulnerable than ever to Japan's invasion in September of 1931.

The Mask of Fu Manchu

By the time horror cult-classic *The Mask of Fu Manchu* debuted in Hollywood in 1932, China had become a more prominent feature in the collective American consciousness. Images of "Dragon Ladies" were prevalent, but the stereotype of the calculating, super-smart Chinese man was becoming equally popular, and the best and most electrifying example of this stereotype is Boris

[1] Chiang Kai-shek's systematic purge of Communists from the Shanghai Kuomintang; by October Chiang had complete control over the KMT. The previous year, Chiang had implemented his "Shanghai Massacre of 1927" in an attempt to cleanse the central government of the Communist's influence. An estimated 400 people were killed and another 5,000 people deemed "missing." (Morton)

[3] Zhang was the warlord of Manchuria from 1916 to 1928 and had been Japan's proxy in China. He was allegedly murdered because Japan was not pleased with his failure to stop Chiang's Nationalist army, which was supported by the Soviet Union. (Morton)

Karloff's portrayal of the diabolical Dr. Fu Manchu.[4] Equal parts genius mastermind and sadistic villain, Karloff's Fu Manchu captured audiences' attention with his exotic que and Imperial-looking robes, which seemed to clash with his eloquent and refined Western-style diction. Aided by his dutiful daughter Fah Lo See (Myrna Loy), the evil doctor attempts to emancipate the Orient from the Imperialism of the West through the mythical power of Genghis Khan's mask and sword. In order to get these items, he kidnaps British archeologists Sir Lionel Barton and Terry Granville, torturing them with methods of science and sorcery.

Figure 2: (LEFT) Fu Manchu taunts Barton as he is subjected to the Bell Torture: "The torture of the bell: it never stops. Minute after minute, hour after hour, day after day. Seems harmless, doesn't it? Just a bell ringing. But the percussion and the repercussion of sound against your eardrums will soften and destroy them until the sound is magnified a thousand times. You can't move. You can't sleep. You will be frantic with thirst. You will be unspeakably foul. But here you will lie, day after day, until you tell." (RIGHT) Fu Manchu injects Terry with his "mind control" serum made of "distilled dragon's blood, my own blood, the organs of different reptiles, and mixed with the magic brew of the sacred seven herbs."

Even the theatrical poster for the film presents Chinese stereotypes. The prominent figure in the scene is Fah Lo See lounging with an opium pipe in her hand, wearing a seductive expression on her face while Fu Manchu looms threateningly in the background, exposing audiences to these stereotypes before they have even seen the first frame of the film. Overall, the film implies that

[4] "I am a doctor of philosophy from Edinburgh, I am a doctor of law from Christ College, I am a doctor of medicine from Harvard. My friends, out of courtesy, call me doctor." – Fu Manchu

Commissioner Nayland Smith's virtuous, civilized and Christian[5] society is what separates him and his friends from the ambition of Fu Manchu – and why they should have control of these artifacts – and that China, exemplified by Fu Manchu, is too dangerous a society to be given any adequate power. However, Fu Manchu's Western intelligence is the underlying threat throughout the entire film, and which grants the villain his power.

Politically, China was becoming more noticeable within the global sphere. The year previous to *Fu Manchu*'s release, the Japanese had fully invaded Manchuria and established the Manzhouguo puppet government. However, despite the obvious illegal and unfounded invasion of China, the United States government was indecisive in its foreign relation policy. Roosevelt's cabinet was at odds; it couldn't determine which of their dual desires was greater: to assist China or to avoid conflict with Japan (Schaller, 53-54). The attitude of the American government can be expressed through this quote concerning the Manchuria Incident (1918) from the Hearst newspaper company: "We sympathize. But it is none of our concern," (Schaller, 43). Furthermore, America had its own problems to deal with, such as the effects of the 1929 Wall Street Crash and the Great Depression.

[5] "At sunrise tomorrow, as my chieftains are assembled in the temple below, you two, and your compatriot, Sir Nayland Smith, will have the pleasure of entering your Christian heaven together! It will be your honor to be the first white martyrs to perish at the hands of the new Genghis Kahn!" – Fu Manchu

"Tintin and the Blue Lotus"

Although originally a Belgian publication, the adventures of Tintin were extremely popular in the United States. The fifth completed serialized comic in Hergé's Tintin series, "Tintin and the Blue Lotus" was influenced by Hergé's friend Chang Chong-chen, whom he met in Brussels in the early 1930s. Because of Chang's influence, "Tintin and the Blue Lotus" was Hergé's first fully-researched comic of the "Tintin" series; he even included a character named "Chang" in the comic, who became one of Tintin's closest friends throughout the series.

Figure 3: Hergé with his friend Chang Chong-chen in Brussels in 1935.

"The Blue Lotus" revolves around Belgian journalist Tintin, who is employed by Mr. Wang and his friends to help stop the drug trafficking in Shanghai. While in Shanghai, Tintin uncovers the Japanese's plot to invade Manchuria with the aid of their operative Mutsuhirato. During his adventure, Tintin saves orphaned Chang, busts the drug ring run by Mutsuhirato and opium cartel boss Rastapopoulos, unearths the Japanese's plot, essentially evicting them from the League of Nations, finds Professor Fang His-Ying who has the cure for Rajaijah juice[6] and is able to cure Mr. Wang's son. As the sequel to the comic "Tintin and the Cigars of the Pharaoh" (1934), "The Blue Lotus" also has carries a fascination with the exotic Orient, setting the adventure and drama in Egypt, Arabia, India, and finally climaxing in China. Hergé also references Japan, using Mutsuhirato as the culpable villain responsible for the suffering of the Chinese.

Figure 4: Mutsuhirato, as an extension of Japan, is the villainous "rat" in "The Blue Lotus" and portrays him as a bumbling, incompetent fool. Hergé also directly references historical fact, such as the Manchurian Incident.

By 1936, Americans were becoming more aware of the Chinese and their political situation in China, and thus becoming more sympathetic, thanks to Chiang's use of American media to garner support for his country,[7] drawing a wedge between the United States and Japan. In China, the Chinese Communist Party's Long March is over, and Mao Zedong and other early Communist leaders begin to mobilize themselves against Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT.[8] In 1937, the "Marco Polo Bridge Incident" occurred between China's National Revolutionary Army

[6] The "madness poison," makes its first appearance in "Cigars of the Pharaoh."
[7] Chiang and his wife were featured several times in U.S. publications such as Time magazine, even being named "Man and Wife of the Year" in 1938, and Chiang was on the cover of Time magazine twice in 1936.
[8] Chiang Kai-shek was captured, but then released shortly thereafter.

and the Imperial Japanese Army, who used it as a gateway to invade mainland China and kick-started the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), further strengthening the West's support and sympathy for China.

"The Nutcracker Suite" from *Fantasia*

In the "Chinese Mushroom" portion of the "Nutcracker Suite," Hop Low and his fungi friends dance the "Tea Dance" originally choreographed by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov in 1892. The "Tea Dance" from the original ballet is characterized by precise hand movements and "hopping." Although the sequence is barely a minute and a half long, these Chinese mushrooms perpetuate Chinese stereotypes with red caps, exaggeratedly slanted eyes, ques, and a submissive bowing posture throughout the dance. While Disney's musical attempted to "recreate" the traditional ballet, the "Tea Dance" is not native to China, but instead idealized by Petipa and Ivanov, neither of whom ever traveled to China or studied Chinese dance.

> Hop Low and his friends, then, enter a cinematic culture that, while amenable to their presence for the moment, nonetheless seeks to contain them within a dominant white racial paradigm – a definition visible in the mushrooms' racialized almond eyes. Things were not

> much different in the world of classical dance, the other visual context in which the *Fantasia Nutcracker* operates. According to Jennifer Fisher in *"Nutcracker" Nation*, most performances of the Chinese tea dance in the ballet then and now frequently center on a moment when the dancer(s) pop up *en pointe* with index fingers held to each side of the head, a position widely considered "*the* balletic emblem of 'Chineseness'" – although it does not occur in any native Chinese dance forms. The rhythmic bowing of the mushrooms in *Fantasia* and their tiny steps between the [Three-Stooges] Curly-inspired jumps at least have some connection with Chinese culture and dance, Fisher argues, although the sequence as a whole, particularly given the way that the "universal" cuteness and innocence of Hop Low deflects attention from specific ethnic characteristics, can hardly be called a sensitive rendering of Chinese dance.
>
> (Miller 133)

The seemingly "innocent" animated mushrooms deliberately continued to perpetuate stereotypes about the Chinese that had dominated the first half of twentieth century cinema.

In 1940, the puppet government in Nanjing was under Wang Jingwei's control. By the early 1940s, Americans knew full well what was happening in China, but still maintained the attitude of ambiguous sympathy (Schaller). It was not until a year later when the Japanese physically attacked Pearl Harbor that the United States mobilized itself, and allied itself with the Chinese.

Reoccurring Images and Themes

Of these four major sources, four contradictory themes regarding Chinese and Chinese American stereotypes are constantly featured in these four media sources, and fluctuate with the historical relevance of each source.

"THE DRAGON LADY"

Figure 6: (ABOVE) Myrna Loy as Fah Lo See sprawls seductively over Terry's unconscious body after she whips him. To her father, she says: "He is not entirely unhandsome, is he, my father?" Fu Manchu replies: "For a white man, no." Fah Lo See is portrayed as sexually sadistic, and motivated by her own passions. (BELOW) Oswald gawks over the "Shimmy Queen's" body, entranced by her before he has even met here, offering her the unique opportunity to get whatever she wants simply because of how she looks.

"EASTERN INNOCENCE"

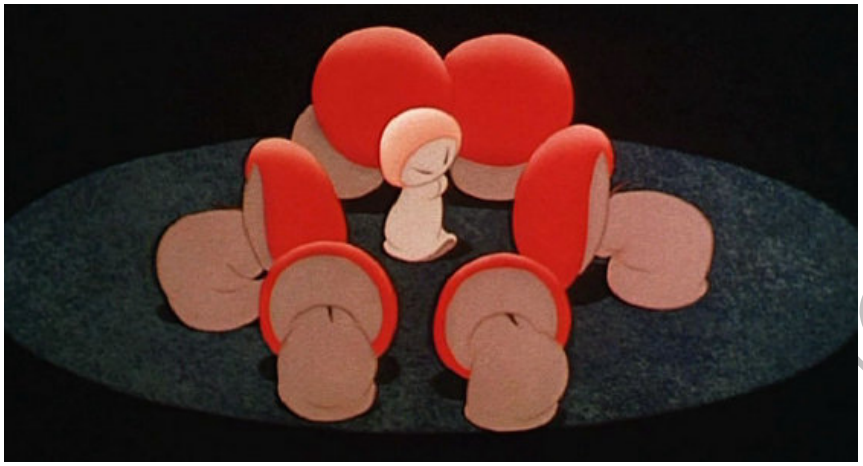


Figure 7: (ABOVE) Everything about the mushrooms implies (BELOW) Tintin is brought to China because the Chinese, represented by Mr. Wang and his associates, cannot help themselves and rid Shanghai of the corruption incited by Mutsuhirato. Mr. Wang's "Pidgen Chinese" makes him appear even more helpless, and the fact that Tintin resolves everything nearly on his own emphasizes the Chinese's vulnerability and inability to defend themselves.

"YELLOW PERIL"

Figure 8: The evil Dr. Fu Manchu is the pure embodiment of the "yellow peril." Other characters in the film constantly insult Fu Manchu based solely on his race, particularly when Sheila Barton calls him a "yellow beast."

"THE EASTERN ALLY"

Figure 9: Chang from "Tintin and the Blue Lotus." Chang exemplifies the stereotype of "Eastern Ally" because he befriends Tintin, who represents the West, immediately upon meeting him: "But going together, the two of us would be much stronger."

Ultimately, these media sources imply that China is not a modern nation. In every one of these four main sources, China is represented as an old and backward nation. This can be attributed to America's general lack of information about China and the creation of the "liberal myth"[9] and Hollywood's desire to present China as an entirely exotic and foreign country, a more appealing image to an otherwise clueless audience.

> To preserve those characters' Otherness while making them racially safe for a primarily white theatergoing audience, studios cast white actors of European backgrounds—so-called "yellow-facing"—in the Asian roles: the British Boris Karloff as…the earlier villain Fu Manchu, the Swede Warner Oland as Charlie Chan, the Hungarian/German Peter Lorre as Mr. Moto. Asian actors were reduced to playing either comic second banana roles or stereotypical inscrutable evildoers. (Miller, 133)

While maintaining this "otherness" may have been visually superficial in origin, this speaks loudly to Western fears of Asia in general.

What was the Effect of these Stereotypes?

Ultimately, these stereotypes fluctuate with the times, especially concerning the relationship between China and the United States. When China is a threat or mystery to Americans, Chinese characters are portrayed as a villainous schemers or sexually immoral "beasts," whereas when China is an ally to the United States, Chinese characters are portrayed as sweet, but innocently helpless and must be cared for by a stronger character, usually a Westernized character.

[9] The Chinese liberal myth created in the second half of the twentieth century represent China as a "troubled modernizer." This myth was supported by stereotypes perpetuated by popular media, American missionaries who became "authorities" regarding China, and the general mystique China maintained once the Communists had taken control of the government and sealed the country off from Western influences. (Madsen)

Figure 10: Even in the theatrical release poster, Mulan is portrayed as mysteriously exotic. And, despite being female, she is shown in a very masculine role.

According to O'Barr, the visual images one sees throughout childhood affects one's opinions and understandings of a topic, and in this case, China and the Chinese. Repeated exposure to these images perpetuates the cycles of stereotypical images because they become a part of the social norm, and are therefore excused if they are not entirely accurate. For example, images in other children and young adult media later in the twentieth century still perpetuate these very old and archaic stereotypes, such as Long Duk Dong from *Sixteen Candles* (1984) and Mulan from *Mulan* (1998).

Foreign exchange student Long Duk Dong, whose name is a pun on sexual organs, is perversely portrayed as a "Dragon Man," showing up periodically throughout the film to proclaim that his only desire while in the United States is to sleep with an American girl. He also speaks in broken English, much to the delight of his American chaperones. In the film *Mulan*, she is racked with guilt over not being the "perfect daughter," and is portrayed as being successful only in masculine roles, such as a warrior. Even when she does "become" a girl again, her dragon friend Mushu comments: "Huh? I'm sorry, did you say something? Hey, you're a girl again. Remember?" At the end of the film, her own grandmother comments: "Great. She brings home a sword. If you ask me, she should've brought home a man," only to have Mulan's love interest Lt. Shang enter the scene a beat later. Granny then finishes her commentary with: "Oh! Sign me up for the next war!"

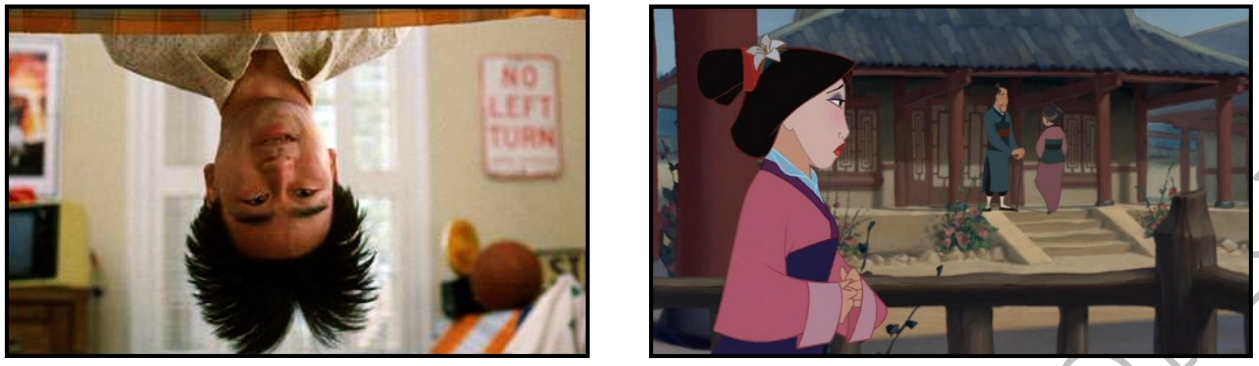


Figure 11: (Left) Long Duk Dong's cringe-worthy opening line: "What's happing, hot stuff?" While Long Duk Dong is clearly not the focus of the film, his appearances are used only for comedy, and portray Chinese students as inherently lazy and sexually driven. (Right) Despite being a reliable and well-accomplished warrior, throughout most of the film Mulan is presented as a girl in an unfamiliarly archaic world in which her only goal is to become the dutiful daughter and "bring honor" to her family.

These stereotypical characters, from Anna May Wong's "Mongol Slave" to the more modern Mulan, are flawed and do not accurately portray China or Chinese characters, which ultimately influence children's perceptions of an entire culture. The "liberal myth" about China is perpetuated by these images continue on for generations, and potentially damages the relationship between China and the United States from a very early age, perhaps before it can even be fully realized.

Works Cited

American Masters: Hollywood Chinese. Dir. Arthur Dong. Perf. Turhan Bey, Joan Chen and Tsai Chin. Center for Asian American Media (CAAM), 2007. *PBS*. Web. 1 Apr. 2011. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/hollywood-chinese/introduction/1146/>.

Fantasia. Dir. Samuel Armstrong. Perf. Leopold Stokowski and Deems Taylor. Walt Disney Production, 1940. Videocassette.

Herge, Leslie Lonsdale-Cooper, and Michael Turner. "Tintin and the Blue Lotus." *The Adventures of Tintin: Tintin in America, Cigars of the Pharaohs, The Blue Lotus*. Vol. 1. Boston: Little, Brown, 1936. *4 Shared*. Web. 11 Mar. 2011. <http://search.4shared.com/q/BBQD/1/books_office/tintin+blue+lotus>.

Madsen, Richard. "America's China: Creation of a Liberal Myth." *China and the American Dream: A Moral Inquiry*. Berkeley: University of California, 1995. 28-58. Print.

The Mask of Fu Manchu. Dir. Charles J. Brabin. By Irene Kuhn, Edgar Allan Woolf, and John Willard. Perf. Boris Karloff and Lewis Stone. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1932. Videocassette.

Miller, Jeffery S. "Infantasia: A Meditation on International Adoption and American Studies." *American Studies* 48.3 (2007): 132-34. *2006 MAASA Presidential Address*. Google Scholar. Web. 7 Apr. 2011. <http://74.125.155.132/scholar?q=cache:E10PDWnH9dcJ:scholar.google.com/&hl=en&as_sdt=0,5>.

Schaller, Michael. "From the Marco Polo Bridge to Pearl Harbor." *The United States and China: Into the Twenty-First Century*. 3rd ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002. 49-66. Print.

Slaying the Dragon. Dir. Deberah Gee. Perf. Herb Wong. Asian Women United, 1988. Videocassette.

Steffen, James. "Articles for The Mask of Fu Manchu." *TCM Turner Classic Movies*. Web. 14 Mar. 2011. <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/title/685/The-Mask-of-Fu-Manchu/articles.html>.

Works Consulted

"Disney Short Subjects: 1920s." *The Cartoon Scrapbook*. Web. 02 Apr. 2011. <http://www.cartoonscrapbook.com/D/disney-short-subjects-1920s.htm>.

Isaacs, Harold Robert. *Scratches on Our Minds; American Images of China and India*. New York: J. Day, 1958. 109-24. Print.

Jurca, Catherine. "What the Public Wanted: Hollywood, 1937-1942." *Cinema Journal* 47.2 (2007): 3-25. *Project MUSE*. Web. 25 Mar. 2011. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/cinema_journal/v047/47.2jurca.html>.

Neeraj2608. "Tintin NÂº 03 - The Blue Lotus." *YouTube*. 18 Dec. 2010. Web. 11 Mar. 2011. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0jjCMI24M0>.

Pease, Nicholas. "The Seriocomicstrip World of Tin-Tin." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 1st ser. 1 (1977): 54-61. *Project MUSE*. Web. 9 Mar. 2011. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/lion_and_the_unicorn/v001/1.1.pease.html>.

Rodenbeck, John. "The Tin-Tin Series: Children's Literature and Popular Appeal." *Children's Literature* 1 (1972): 93-97. *Project MUSE*. Web. 6 Mar. 2011. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/childrens_literature/v001/1.rodenbeck.html>.

Shary, Timothy. "Teen Films: The Cinematic Image of Youth." *Film Genre Reader III*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. 4th ed. Austin, TX: University of Texas, 2003. 490-515. Print.