Fantasies of the "Yellow Peril": "Miscegenation" in *The Cheat* (1915) and *Broken Blossoms* (1919)

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Introduction

What has been termed miscegenation exists at the borders not just of "race" but also of sexuality. The term miscegenation was itself a construction, being invented in 1863 by two New York Democrats, David Goodman Croly and George Wakeman, an editor and reporter respectively for the New York *World*, the most influential Democratic journal. They attempted to ascribe to all Republicans the supposed views of extreme abolitionists, that they wholeheartedly supported intermarriage between the races, and thus hoped to influence the 1864 presidential election by making an issue out of intermarriage.[1] The term consequently becomes implicated in questions of regulation and political power since sexuality itself, as Lee Grieveson notes, "exists at the interface between the individual body and the social body."[2] Ann Laura Stoler, examining the construction of sexuality from a colonial perspective, notes how sex became an issue for colonial administrators, who linked sexuality with the "potentialities of colonial settlement and to the production of populations that would

[1] David Goodman Croly, George Wakeman, and E.C. Howell. *Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and Negro* (London: Trübner & Co., 1864); Elise Lemire, *"Miscegenation": Making Race in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 116-18. Also see Sidney Kaplan, "The Miscegenation Issue in the Election of 1864," *Journal of Negro History* 34:3, July 1949, 274-343.

[2] Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 19-20.

be made loyal to emerging colonial states. … it was specific individuals and those in authority who identified sex as a domain of control." Stoler notes that women were viewed by the Dutch and British as "desired objects, but unruly desiring subjects as well" and that unmanaged sexuality was considered a threat.[3] In an American perspective, the concern over miscegenation was not only a result of attempts to control race, but also attempts to control sexuality. This focused on the sexuality of "white" women, who were, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, viewed as "the best conveyors of advanced civilization."[4] Thus, attempts to control and restrict miscegenation were often attempts to control the sexuality of white women. Alternatively, the sexual constructions of "non-white" women were developed in such a way as to emphasise their passion, lasciviousness, and even sexual abandonment and depravity, particularly in comparison to their white counterparts. Winthrop Jordan and Martha Hodes note that it was in this way that white men could justify their sexual activity with such women and thus shift the responsibility and moral weakness onto them and away from themselves.[5]

The concerns over miscegenation would become an explosive issue in the first few decades of the twentieth century and the cinema was an influential medium to pass on these fears. Concerns about miscegenation had existed from the early years of European settlement in the United States, expressed in the numerous anti-miscegenation laws on the statute books

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3 Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 39-42.

4 Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 148-49; Louise Michele Newman, *White Women's Rights: The Racial Origins of Feminism in the United States* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 22-23.

5 Jordan, *White Over Black*, 151; Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth Century South* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 5.

of many states from the seventeenth century, and particularly after the end of the Civil War in 1865.[6] While most anti-miscegenation laws focused on relationships between whites and Native Americans or whites and African Americans, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries relationships between whites and Asians were viewed with increasing concern. As larger numbers of white settlers moved West in the post-war years, particularly between the 1870s and the 1890s, they encountered not only Indians, who had been virtually eradicated in the East by the 1840s (through disease, war, and removal policy), but also an increasing number of migrant groups from Asia, primarily from China and Japan, who had emigrated to the United States and settled on the West Coast.

Chinese men were especially seen as a danger, in part because the vast majority of Chinese immigrants to the United States were single men. This, combined with the sexual exploitation of Chinese women, many of whom were involved in prostitution, strengthened a stereotype of degraded sexuality among the Chinese in general. The employment of Chinese men as servants in households also opened up the possibility of interracial intimacy and sex, and thus the threat of racial pollution in the home.[7] California, where the majority of Chinese

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6 Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton & Company, 1975), 333-34; Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 8; Peggy Pascoe, "Miscegenation Law, Court Cases, and Ideologies of 'Race' in Twentieth-Century America," in Martha Hodes, ed. *Sex, Love and Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 464-90.

7 Robert G. Lee, *Orientals: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), 9-10. Concerns about Chinese immigration into the United States led to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, the first law in the U.S. that prevented a specific racial group from entering the country on the grounds of race or nationality. The bill was extended every decade until 1943, when the Act was repealed and the Chinese were allowed to migrate to the U.S., albeit in very small numbers. See Andrew

who had entered the U.S. Lived and worked, was one of the first states to pass a series of laws, beginning in 1879, which attempted to control the sexual threat of the Chinese. An outright ban on marriage between whites and Chinese was passed in 1905.[8] Similar bills, not just limited to Chinese but also including Japanese immigrants, were introduced in states such as Illinois in 1909 and Michigan in 1911, and passed in Montana in 1909 and Nebraska in 1913.[9] The inclusion of the Japanese in anti-miscegenation bills in the early twentieth century reflected the increased Japanese immigration into the United States after 1880. Most early Japanese immigrants were, like the Chinese, male labourers. In 1907, however, the "Gentleman's Agreement" between Japan and the United States began to limit Japanese immigration. Day labourers were prevented from migrating to the U.S. While increasing numbers of women were encouraged to immigrate, leading to a more balanced sex ratio among Japanese immigrants than existed among the Chinese. Japanese immigration was, however, eventually barred in 1924 by the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act. Despite the limits on Japanese immigration into the United States, their inclusion in anti-miscegenation bills in

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Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 212-59; Roger Daniels, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States since 1850* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1987), 56.

[8] Discrimination against marriage with Asians was also enacted on a national level. In 1907, Congress passed the Expatriation Act, in which women who married foreign nationals could be stripped of their citizenship. The Cable Act, passed fifteen years later, stopped automatically treating a woman's citizenship as a derivation of her husband's. In addition, it limited the autonomy of a woman to make a decision concerning marriage with aliens who were not allowed to become naturalized citizens. Rachel F. Moran, *Interracial Intimacy: The Regulation of Race and Romance* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 31-32.

[9] David H. Fowler, *Northern Attitudes Towards Interracial Marriage: Legislation and Public Opinion in the Middle Atlantic States and the States of the Old Northwest, 1780-1930* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1987), 297-98, 397, 399.

the early twentieth century reflected growing American fears of a "yellow peril" that would overwhelm white workers and even American civilisation itself.[10]

In films, concerns about miscegenation were combined with the popular perception in American society and culture of the Orient as a barbaric yet an "exotic" place.[11] The American film industry displayed a fascination with such exoticism. It often set films in what were supposedly "exotic" locations as a means of boosting box-office appeal. The China and Japan of Hollywood's imagination, of course, had little or nothing to do with the realities of the countries themselves. But movies dealing with Oriental-white sexual relationships could often displace their story onto an exotic, foreign-looking location and, perhaps, created greater freedom in how miscegenation was presented in the stories themselves. Two such films, *The Cheat* (1915) and *Broken Blossoms* (1919), provided a visual platform in which to echo concerns about the dangers of miscegenation which were dominant in early twentieth-century America. *The Cheat* emphasised the negativity of interracial relationships while

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[10] Henry Yu, "Mixing Bodies and Cultures: The Meaning of America's Fascination with Sex between 'Orientals' and 'Whites,'" in Martha Hodes, ed., *Sex, Love, and Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1999), 444-63; Lee, *Orientals*, 108; Daniels, *Asian America*, 126.

[11] Initial Western views of China and Japan were not linked with exoticism. They arose from the desire to trade with both countries. When Commodore Matthew Perry effectively opened Japan to the Western world in 1853, he viewed the Japanese as culturally inferior to westerners. They were, he believed, "a weak and semi-barbarous people" who were "vindictive in character" and "deceitful." American views of the Japanese changed after Japan sent its first embassy to the United States in 1860 and trade goods began to arrive. Indeed, some Americans began to admire the aesthetic aspects of Japanese culture. William L. Neumann, *American Encounters Japan: From Perry to MacArthur* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1963), 30-31, 61-67. Edward Said notes that Western, particularly British, views of Orientals would assume that their history and culture made them appear to possess "regular characteristics," but at the same time always made a clear distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority. Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 36-49.

Broken Blossoms offered a more sympathetic portrayal. Yet one aspect that would be represented in the vast majority of these films was the violence that would be committed against one member (and sometimes both) of an inter-racial couple, often separating them in the process. Thus miscegenation, even if portrayed in a more positive light, was nearly always linked with violence and viewed, for the most part, as something to approach with caution.

***The Cheat* (1915)**

One of the first American films to treat the issue of white-Oriental miscegenation in a major way was Cecil B. DeMille's *The Cheat*. The story, conceived by Hector Turnbull and Jeanie McPherson, was about a society woman, Edith Hardy (Fannie Ward), who loses $10,000 of Red Cross funds on a stock market gamble. To avoid a scandal, she borrows that amount from a Japanese art collector, Hishuru Tori (Sessue Hayakawa), and agrees to become his lover in return. After receiving the money from Tori, Edith's husband, stockbroker Richard Hardy (Jack Dean), makes a huge profit on some stocks and gives her $10,000. When Edith tries to return the money to Tori, he refuses it, and wants her to keep her promise. She refuses, and he brands her with *the* hot iron he uses to brand all his belongings. To protect herself, she shoots him and leaves. Her husband arrives at the house after Tori has been wounded and is arrested by the police. Richard takes the blame for Tori's shooting in order to protect Edith. Desperate to save her husband from prison, Edith once again approaches Tori, offering to become his lover. Tori, not trusting her, refuses the offer and Richard's trial commences. But the truth is uncovered when, after Richard is found guilty of shooting Tori, Edith reveals her brand to the

courtroom. Richard is released and leaves with Edith while Tori must be protected from the men in the courtroom, who are on the verge of lynching him for his actions.

In many ways, the characterisation of Tori represents the hidden "threat" of the Oriental in American society, the so-called "yellow peril."[12] He lives the dual life of the exotic Oriental and modern Western man. When he is first shown in the film, he is in his private, oriental sanctuary within his modern Western house, wearing his Japanese robes, branding his mark on his possessions. The background of the shot is in darkness and, from that moment, he is presented as a hidden threat. Much of the stir created by the film was a result of several dramatically-lit shots employed by DeMille, who worked with cameraman Alvin Wyckoff and art director Wilfred Buckland to exploit low-key lighting and, utilising the set design comprised of Japanese shoji screens, photographed reverse shots with shadow figures. Sumiko Higashi notes that DeMille, in introducing Tori, changed the shot from Tori dressed in American flannels reading a newspaper and smoking to a "Scene dyed *Red* – Black Drop – Oriental lamp – brazier of coals – Tori takes iron away from object he is branding – turns out light – replaces iron in brazier – his face shown in light from coals – when he puts lid on brazier screen goes black." Higashi states the "film thus emphasized the racial 'Otherness' of the Asian merchant, who is both fascinating and repulsive" as well as drawing attention to

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[12] Roger Daniels notes that the term "Yellow Peril" may first have been introduced as part of an anti-Chinese propaganda campaign in the Eastern United States in a *New York Tribune* article by Henry George in 1869. The term initially hinted at the possibility of an invasion of the United States by an Asian army. This fear became more acute in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because of a combination of the rise of pseudo-scientific beliefs in Anglo-Saxon and Aryan racial superiority and fears concerning the rising tide of immigration into the United States. Daniels, *Asian America*, 39-40; Roger Daniels, *The Politics of Prejudice: The Anti-Japanese Movement in California and the Struggle for Japanese Exclusion* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), 66-70.

"the character's dangerous sexuality."[13]

Along with the use of tinting, the lighting also highlights Edith's "whiteness" when she is with Tori. When Tori takes her into his back room, or "Shoji Room," Edith, dressed in light clothing, stands out clearly against both the dark walls of the room and Tori's dark tuxedo, the contrast emphasising her whiteness. When she learns about the loss of the $10,000, her whiteness is again emphasised when she faints and falls against a background of dark floors and furniture. Tori, coming to her after she faints, turns off the light, thus enveloping the room and himself in darkness while Edith's prone white figure stands out. In that moment of darkness, Tori embraces her, then leads her to the shoji screen, where the shadow figures of her husband and his secretary (Lucien Littlefield) stand. The shadowy figures, relatively well lit against the screen while the Shoji room itself seems dark, discuss their investments. Edith overhears her husband tell his secretary, who has invested Edith's money, that he does not have enough money to bail out his friend, and thus Edith, from possible financial ruin and scandal. The whiteness of an increasingly desperate Edith is again highlighted as the rest of the room appears dark, and Tori, barely visible amidst the darkness, stands behind her warning of the scandal and the only option she can take. That Edith is cornered and has no choice is highlighted by the chair Tori leads her to and the position in which she sits. She leans her arms and hands against the arm of the chair, effectively preventing her body from moving forward. The lighting and positioning of her body suggests that she has no choice but to accept Tori's proposal.

The use of lighting and shadow is also important in the scene in which Edith attempts

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[13] Sumiko Higashi, *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture: The Silent Era* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 101-102.

to repay Tori and escape the consequences of her bargain. As she prepares to go to Tori's, her whiteness is again highlighted in a darkened room, with only her face and her body, in a light-colored cape with a dark fur lining around the edges, accentuated. When she enters the room, her whiteness of complexion is again emphasised, this time because she is wearing a dark dress. When Tori brands her, the brand stands out, as the only marking on her "white" skin. This branding, and the violence committed against her, is revealed in the courtroom when Edith exposes it to the judge and the audience. Her whiteness allows her to be a heroine and victim despite her self-serving actions. Although she is presented as a liar and deceiver, who gambled away funds for war refugees, lied to her husband, and lied to Tori, she is still in racial terms a "white" woman who must be protected from the sexual desires of "non-white" men. Tori is consistently presented as a dangerous character, his "darkness" always contrasting with Edith's "whiteness." But at the same time, through his clothes and home, he is also an ambiguous figure. Part of the danger he poses is the result of his mixture of East and West. While he is superficially Western, his inner self is truly Asian. His branding of his personal belongings foreshadows his branding of Edith. The dark atmosphere, with the heat and smoke from the fire, alludes to his own darker, more sinister side. Publically, he drives his car, wears Western clothes of the latest design, and escorts Edith to garden parties. He seems confident, friendly, helpful, and sympathetic to Edith's financial woes and arguments with her husband and, thus, gains her confidence. But, despite his appearance, he is a dangerous man, whose true self is hidden by his cloak of Western civilisation and outward appearance of joviality and modernity.

Although Tori socialises with the Long Island smart set, he is not really a part of it. He

is primarily sought by them because of his immense wealth. For instance, when he escorts Edith to an afternoon charity function, he leads her into the centre of the group, then retreats to the side of the park, holding Edith's coat and smoking. It is only when he agrees to host the charity ball for the Red Cross in his home that is he brought into the group and actually speaks to the society ladies who have organised the event. His interactions with them illustrate the fickle nature of Western society. The social elite will pursue him for their own needs but otherwise show no interest in him. Throughout the film, Tori is most often associated with women, which both feminises him and shows the danger he is to the home. He is Edith's friend and companion to social events and, when he is at the party, he socialises primarily with women. The only men Tori is seen with are his male Japanese servants. But while Tori is presented as being very friendly and accommodating towards white women, in reality he represents a sexual threat to them. The danger he poses to Edith, in particular, becomes progressively clearer during the course of the film. From the start, he shows a marked interest in her, and his attention never wavers. His threat to her manifests itself first in his supposedly friendly interest in her as a person. He often visits her at home and escorts her to events, which arouses anger, suspicion, and jealousy on the part of her husband. He is Edith's confidant, and she turns to him when she argues with her husband over finances and brings Richard's jealousy to his attention. Her problems are, she tells him, "The same old story – my husband objects to my extravagances – and you." Tori seems shocked to hear this. When he points to himself, Edith nods. He mouths the word "Why?" and reaches for the phone, but she prevents him from calling Richard and confronting him, and the two leave for a party. While the film has already shown Tori as a dark and ominous figure, Edith herself

therefore is the first to mention that he might be considered objectionable.

The danger to Edith becomes more apparent at the charity ball in his home. Tori isolates Edith from the rest of the ball by taking her on a tour of his home, allegedly to show her some art. In his Oriental sanctuary, she marvels over the decorations, the incense burning, and his possessions. When she asks why his objects are branded, he shows her his brand and explains its significance. Tori now actively pursues Edith, by putting his arm around her, a gesture she rejects. When Edith faints after hearing about the loss of the money Tori, who is alone with her and holding her, takes advantage of the situation and kisses her while she is unconscious, thus revealing himself to be a sexual threat.

The branding and courtroom scenes are representative of the violence often associated with miscegenatory fantasies. Tori, by giving Edith the gun to shoot herself, shows the inverse of the fate worse than death. Rather than a "white" man attempting to kill the "white" woman to prevent her sexual possession by a "non-white" man, it is a "non-white" man who provides the weapon for the "white" woman to kill herself. Edith, of course, uses the gun to shoot Tori rather than herself, thus turning the weapon on the aggressor. The branding by Tori is almost a sexual act in itself. Although Edith has not been marked by any sexual experience with Tori, she has been physically marked by him. Once she is branded, Edith is no longer independent, but an object in Tori's collection, forever marked as a possession of a man who is not her husband, and of a race different from her own. It is a visual representation of the ultimate "white" male fear of the male "Other," the possession of a "white" woman by a "non-white" man. No explanation is given by Edith or Tori of why he branded her. The judge himself never asks why Tori behaved in such a way. Edith justifies her actions because Tori branded

her, which is at best a half-truth. She does shoot him because he branded her, but he branded her essentially because she refused to live up to her end of their bargain. Even more important is that the men in the courtroom are not interested in knowing the truth behind the whole matter, but are quite willing to lynch Tori simply because he has desired, and placed his mark on, a "white" woman. Although Tori is presented as a villain in the film, Edith herself is far from being without fault.

While Tori does attempt to seduce her, Edith, throughout the film, is a greedy, vain, and frivolous woman who cares more about her place in society than anything else. Although Tori is presented as an intruder in the sanctity of the Hardy home, there is little that is precious there. Richard is as obsessed with making money as Edith is with spending it. Edith is more concerned about the right clothing and keeping up appearances with her friends than domestic issues. She does not even pay her maid, having spent the money, and Richard is obliged to pay her. It is Tori who sees her true personality and who takes advantage of it. Her loss of the $10,000 was not the result of an attempt to raise more money for the charity, but to use the potential profits from the investment to spend on herself. The only contrition she shows is at the trial, when she openly humiliates herself in order to save her husband. But before doing so, she goes to Tori, offering herself to him, again, in order to stop the trial of her husband. But she never takes responsibility for her own actions, all of which lead to the film's dénouement.

The Cheat created a strong impression among critics. The lighting was praised by several reviewers. *Motion Picture News* thought the film would "mark a new era in lighting as applied to screen productions." *Photoplay* felt it was "full of incisive character touches, racial

truths and dazzling contrasts."[14] *Variety* praised the casting, focusing in particular on "one of the best yellow heavies the screen has ever had" and praising the Lasky company for "having discovered the best Japanese heavy man that has been utilized in filmdom." The same reviewer emphasised the importance of the racial angle to the film by observing that "without the third point of the eternal triangle having been one of an alien race the role of Edith Hardy in this picture would have been one of the most unsympathetic that has even been screened and therefore would have been useless as a vehicle for any of their [the Lasky company's] women stars."[15] The representation of Tori was extremely negative, echoing the negative impression of the Japanese that was common in American (and particularly Californian) society at the time. In many ways, *The Cheat* was playing to the hysteria concerning "race" and "racial mixture" that currently existed. It was released in the same year as D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, and offered its own particular warning of the dangers of interracial mixture.

The film also fed into the current of anti-Japanese feeling that was running strongly in the U.S. At the beginning of the twentieth century. To some people, the threat of the Japanese was even greater than that of the Chinese. The Japanese were perceived as being able to adapt more easily to Western ways than the Chinese, more aggressive in economic competition, and attempting to integrate more into American society than the Chinese had done.[16] Matters were not helped when the Japanese defeated the Russians in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905,

[14] Quotes from *Motion Picture News* and *Photoplay* in Higashi, *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture*, 111.
[15] "The Cheat," *Variety*, 17 December 1915.
[16] Richard A. Oehling, "Hollywood and the Image of the Oriental, 1910-1950 – Part I," *Film and History*, 8:2, May 1978: 33-41.

which not only highlighted Russia's military weakness, but Japan's military strength, and was the first defeat of a major "white" power by "non-whites".[17] DeMille depicted Tori as a Japanese man who was able to blend in fairly effortlessly with his white neighbours, despite being a danger to white women. His wealth, physical power, and violence towards Edith could be interpreted as symbolic of the modern, wealthy, and powerful Japan. Yet the film's racist portrayal of Tori, and the fact that it allowed Edith to go unpunished for her own actions, including the attempted murder of Tori, hint at how whites in 1915 felt towards Asians. A major protest came from the Japanese Embassy to DeMille about the portrayal of Tori, ultimately leading to the character's name and nationality being changed, in the film's 1918 re-release, to Haka Arakau, a Burmese ivory trader.[18]

The film also led to the stardom of Sessue Hayakawa, the Japanese actor who played Tori. Hayakawa had a brief but successful career in Hollywood before, tired of playing stereotyped roles, leaving to work in Europe and Japan. During his most productive period in Hollywood, between 1914 and 1922 he portrayed a variety of characters, including romantic leads in melodramas in which he would sometimes woo white women.[19] In those of his films which presented themes of miscegenation, his relationships were never allowed to last.[20] Such

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[17] Oehling, "Hollywood": 35.

[18] DeWitt Bodeen, "Sessue Hayakawa: First International Japanese Film Star," *Films in Review*, 27:4, April 1976: 193-208, see particularly 197.

[19] Donald Kirihara, "The Accepted Idea Displaced: Stereotype and Sessue Hayakawa," in Daniel Bernardi, ed., *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 81-89. Hayakawa had noticed the rising anti-Japanese sentiment in California and claimed he left the film industry in part because of this and an attempt on his life while filming *The Vermilion Pencil* (1922). Sessue Hayakawa, *Zen Showed Me the Way ... to Peace, Happiness and Tranquility* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1960), 146-47, 152-57.

[20] Hayakawa's only leading lady who survived at the end of the film was played by actress

representations of miscegenation conformed with the dominant perception at the time that whites and Asians should, in a romantic sense, remain separate.[21] Hayakawa noted this, but viewed his failed romances in films in a different and more positive light, believing that "Public acceptance of me in romantic roles was a blow of sorts against racial intolerance, even though I lost the girl in the last reel."[22]

That Hayakawa was able to develop a successful film career and achieve stardom as a Japanese actor during a period of increasing anti-Japanese feeling nationally suggests that miscegenation was a theme that audiences found intriguing. That Hayakawa never was able to keep his "white" lover also indicates that the industry, and perhaps audiences, had limits to what they would accept. Donald Kirihara notes that, in many of the films he produced independently after leaving the Lasky company in 1918, Hayakawa often portrayed "a man caught between two cultures, attempting to act out an accommodationist ethic through occasionally violent means."[23] Hayakawa ultimately believed that in his films he "was able to dispel the deep-stained conception of the Oriental as a man of mystery and a traditionally sinister figure."[24] As one of the few non-white leading actors, he played an important role in developing some of the stereotypes of Asians that would become prevalent on screen.

Tsuru Aoki, who was also his wife. Michelle Locke, "Hayakawa Broke Barriers But Never Got the Girl," *Classic Images*, 239, May 1995: 20.

21 Richard A. Oehling, "The Yellow Menace: Asian Images in American Film," Randall M. Miller, ed., *The Kaleidoscopic Lens: How Hollywood Views Ethnic Groups* (Englewood, N.J.: Jerome S. Ozer, 1980), 182-206.

22 Hayakawa, *Zen Showed Me the Way*, 138-39.

23 Kirihara, "The Accepted Idea Displaced," 96.

24 Hayakawa, *Zen Showed Me the Way*, 138.

***Broken Blossoms* (1919)**

During the late 1910s, there was another ground-breaking representation of white/Asian relationships, although this time it was much more sympathetic than DeMille's lurid representation of the Tori/Edith relationship in *The Cheat*. Instead, it was a tragic story of the relationships between a young, abused girl, her brutal father, and a disillusioned Chinese man set in the poverty-stricken environment of Limehouse in London. Directed by D.W. Griffith, *Broken Blossoms* was a film that was far removed from the themes of greed, lust, and hedonism displayed in *The Cheat*. The representation of the Chinese protagonist, Cheng Huan, was also far from the sinister, manipulative, and deceptive image of a Japanese man DeMille presented in *The Cheat*. The relatively benign interpretation of Cheng Huan may have reflected two other factors. First, that Chinese in the United States – with their immigration banned since 1882 – were no longer perceived, even on the West Coast, as the palpable threat to the American social fabric that the Japanese were. Second, that whereas *The Cheat* dealt with miscegenatory themes against an American background, *Broken Blossoms* not only had no American characters, it displaced the whole issue of miscegenation itself onto foreign soil.

After the controversy surrounding his negative representations of African Americans in *The Birth of a Nation*, Griffith, always sensitive to the criticisms of the representation of racism in that film, followed it with *Intolerance*, which examined religious and class intolerance rather than racial intolerance, but was his filmic response to the criticism surrounding *Birth*. Although Griffith remained busy during the next few years with various

projects, including his propagandistic war film, *Hearts of the World* (1918), it was a small film made in 1918, *Broken Blossoms*, that would be his next great critical and commercial hit, as well as a film in which, for once, according to Russell Merritt, "racial bigotry is a target for bitter reproach."[25]

Broken Blossoms was one of the most original films made by Griffith. Released in 1919, after the end of the war, the director connected with the public's desire to escape films with war themes. Based on the story "The Chink and the Child" in Thomas Burke's novel *Limehouse Nights*, published in 1917, the story and film ran counter to what was believed to be the formula for a successful film. There were various taboos broken in the story, including miscegenation, voyeurism, opium use, domestic violence, murder, and revenge killing. As Arthur Lenning noted in his study of the film, at the time "'The Chink and the Child' ran counter to almost every American precept by dealing with poverty, ugliness, and offering an unhappy ending. The murder of the heroine and the suicide of the hero were bad enough, but to compound the audacity, the heroine wore rags and the hero was a slant-eyed, impassive foreigner."[26] But for Griffith, the film supposedly had an important message. Lenning noted Griffith claimed that he wanted

> to help riddle the fallacious notion that Americans are superior to those they call "foreigners." Too many Americans labor under the delusion that they are the greatest people in the world, and that all others are "foreigners." Now I believe that so long as we

[25] Russell Merritt, "In and Around *Broken Blossom*," *Griffithiana*, 48/49, October 1993: 13-19.

[26] Arthur Lenning, "D. W. Griffith and the Making of an Unconventional Masterpiece," *The Film Journal*, 1:3/4, Fall-Winter 1972: 2-15.

> Americans speak out with shallow contempt of Italians as "wops," of Frenchmen as "frog-eaters" and of Chinese as "Chinks," so long as we imagine that we alone represent all the heroism and beauty and ideals of the world first, so long will the efforts of such idealistic leaders as President Wilson [fail].[27]

The story of "The Chink and the Child" was set in east London and concerned the briefly intertwining lives of a prize-fighter, Battling Burrows (Donald Crisp), his twelve-year old daughter, Lucy (Lillian Gish), and an idealistic young Chinese missionary, Cheng Huan (Richard Barthelmess), who has come to the warring West to teach peace according to the tenets of Buddha. All, however, live fairly bleak lives. Cheng Huan does not fulfil his missionary goals and runs a shop in the Limehouse area. Lucy is basically a servant for her father, cooking and cleaning for him. She is horribly and regularly beaten by Burrows. After one particular beating, Lucy stumbles away from their home and collapses in Cheng Huan's shop, after which he takes her to his room and cares for her. Burrows eventually discovers what is going on and finds Lucy, takes her home, and beats her to death. Cheng Huan, when he discovers that Lucy is gone, goes to find her. When he discovers that she is dead, he kills Burrows, takes Lucy's body back to his room, and then commits suicide.

In many ways, this film was very different from Griffith's previous films. Although it fitted the melodramatic style he was fond of, it was essentially a tragedy, and there were concerns whether it could be a box-office success. Griffith himself confessed, in a letter to Thomas Burke that, "When I first contemplated making a cinema drama of your story, it met

[27] Ibid.: 2.

with fierce objection among all the distributors connected with our industry. Of course, as I don't need to tell you, the presentation of tragedy, either in movies or on the stage, is a very daring thing as I cannot recall any that have been successful with the people." Griffith went on to say: "It was my intention to attempt a real tragedy with the motion pictures, and so [I] used your story for this purpose."[28]

The representations of the characters in the film were unique. While Lucy and Cheng Huan were supposed to be the heroes of the film, they were unlikely heroes. Lucy was a poor abused girl who would be killed in the end not by a dangerous stranger, the dreadful Oriental "Other," but by her own father. Cheng began as an idealistic, peace-loving student of Buddha, but ended up running his little shop, smoking opium, and falling in love with the unwanted girl. All three major characters are victims. Battling Burrows is a victim of his own lifestyle of wine and women and his violent way of life as a pugilist. Lucy is a victim of her father's rage and frustration and, in the end, a victim of his racism and fears of miscegenation. Cheng Huan is a victim of his own shattered ideals and of contemporary society's views of race and racial segregation. Although Gish yet again portrayed the idealisation of Griffith femininity and womanhood, in contrast to her previous roles in numerous Griffith films including *The Birth of a Nation* there was a wistful, even dreamlike, quality to the way she appeared in *Broken Blossoms*. In part, this was a result of Griffith's hiring of Hendrik Sartov to help with the photography.[29] But it was also because of the story itself and the characterisation of Lucy.

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[28] D. W. Griffith to Thomas Burke, 1 October 1919, D. W. Griffith Papers, microfilm edition, Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

[29] Explanations of the method of photography of the film are in G. W. Bitzer, *Billy Bitzer: His Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 200-201, 205-206.

Griffith raised the age of Lucy from twelve to fifteen in order to make easier for Gish to play the character. But raising Lucy's age also made it more possible for Griffith to delve deeper into the sexual desires and frustrations of the characters. Lucy is at the centre of this desire and frustration, both because of her relationship with Burrows and as the object of desire for Cheng Huan. From the very first intertitles, the love story aspect of the film, and also of its impossibility, is made clear: "It is a tale of temple bells, sounding at sunset before the image of Buddha; it is a tale of love and lovers; it is a tale of tears."

One of the major points of the film concerns the consequences of sex. And the character who learns of the consequences of various kinds of sexual relations is Lucy. Her very life is a consequence of Burrows's own promiscuous sex life. She is illegitimate, the result of one of Burrow's flings, "a bundle of white rags" thrust into Burrows's arms. From these inauspicious beginnings, Lucy tries to find her role in the society she lives in. She has several acquaintances who offer her advice. One woman, who has a house full of screaming children, advises Lucy not to marry. Two prostitutes she knows advise her not to go into that particular profession. Because of the limitations placed on her life, she lives with her father and acts as his housekeeper. Her relationship with Burrows, however, does not appear to be a normal father-daughter one. She is his servant, who shops, cooks, and cleans for him. Some of her conversations with Burrows, moreover, hint at the possibility of incest, especially when he tries to coax a smile from her.[30] Burrows's extreme response to Lucy's involvement with Cheng Huan even seems to point to some jealousy on his part, not just fatherly concern.

[30] Julia Lesage, "*Broken Blossoms*: Artful Racism, Artful Rape," *Jump Cut*, 26, December 1981: 51-55. In this article, Lesage analyses more fully the sexual aspects of the film, especially the incestuous nature of Lucy's relationship with Burrows.

While in previous Griffith films, Gish is threatened with death to prevent her from falling into the hands of "non-white" men who are apparently ready and waiting to defile her, in *Broken Blossoms* she has been in the care of the "non-white" man, and nothing has happened to her. Rather than protecting her from the threat of miscegenation, Burrows's actions point to his belief that she has already given in to the lustful desires of Cheng Huan and, in any case, must be punished for being their object. Though the audience knows that she has not committed any physical act with Cheng Huan, her delight in wearing Chinese robes, at being taken care of by him, and her obvious pleasure in his company is perhaps still too far for their relationship to go towards breaking the taboo against miscegenation.

The main rival with Burrows for Lucy's affections is Cheng Huan. In many ways, he fits the already-existing filmic stereotype of the Asian male. He looks effeminate, and is certainly not as large, muscular, or overtly sexual as Burrows, who is shown out in bars drinking and being together with women when not in the ring. Cheng Huan remains dressed in his robes, is slightly stooped, and is even shown to have taken up the "Chinese" vice of smoking opium. Even before she stumbles into his shop after her terrible beating, Cheng Huan has already noticed Lucy wandering around the area as she shops for food. Before he is able to take "possession" of her, she is already the object of his desire. Intertitles note that: "The Yellow Man watched Lucy often. The beauty which all Limehouse seemed to miss smote him to the heart." When he finally is able to have her in his room, he does not attempt to take her sexually. Instead, "He dreams her prattle, her bird-like ways, her sweet self – are all his own." Although he wants to kiss her, when he notices Lucy move back in fear he instead kisses her sleeve: "His love remains a pure and holy thing – even his worst foe says

this."

The strength of their attraction and need for each other lead them to coin nicknames for each other. He calls her "White Blossom" and she affectionately refers to him as "Chinky." Although Lucy is reticent about any physical involvement with Cheng Huan, she allows herself to become "Orientalised." She sleeps in the bed that Cheng Huan has set up for her and dresses in the Chinese robes he provides and enjoys wearing them. She strokes the material and adjusts the clothing to make it fit more attractively on her. She also appreciates Cheng Huan's attempts to make her happier and more comfortable. She accepts his gifts, and revels in the exotic atmosphere she finds in his room. In exchanging nicknames, they allow their relationship to proceed to a more intimate level. Yet it does not go any further. Lucy enjoys the attention, but she is fearful of the feelings they awaken in Cheng Huan. Cheng Huan, because of his restraint in holding back the physical aspect of his love for Lucy, becomes a stronger, and more noble and positive character. He loves her, but he respects the racial boundaries. He also senses her fear of sexual intimacy and continues to care for her without forcing his desires upon her. During this period in the United States, when anti-Oriental prejudice was at its height, the film seemed to go against the fears of the "yellow peril" and the supposed danger to the white race by presenting a relationship that was neither perilous nor dangerous but gentle and respectful.

The danger to the relationship comes when Burrows hears about it. Although he is away at camp preparing for a fight, when he learns that Lucy has been living in Cheng Huan's home, he is furious, immediately assuming that she has had a sexual relationship with him. After the fight, he finds her in Cheng Huan's room, dressed in Chinese robes. Burrows forces

her to take off the clothes and drags her back home. Despite her protests that she did nothing wrong, Burrows still refuses to think anything but the worst – that she has had interracial sex with a Chinese man. Even though she has not, she has still allowed herself to be Orientalised in her appearance.

Broken Blossoms was, in the words of Julia Lesage, "a sensitive and humanitarian film. It daringly presented a chaste and ideally beautiful love between an immigrant Chinese and a young white girl."[31] Lucy was never physically threatened by Cheng Huan in the way Edith was branded by Tori in *The Cheat*. Unlike Tori, Cheng Huan appeared to respect the racial boundaries that existed. Consequently *Broken Blossoms* was one of the most positive representations of miscegenation between Asians and whites that the mainstream American film industry would present for many years. The depiction of Cheng Huan was hugely different from that of Tori in *The Cheat*. The portrait of Tori mirrored the attempt of many Japanese immigrants to try to assimilate more into American culture and thus avoid the problems that had earlier faced Chinese immigrants, who were very separate from American society. Yet, while they worked hard to assimilate themselves into American society, many Japanese also worked to preserve Japanese traditions and culture. Tori, in fact, symbolised the suspicion many Americans felt towards the Japanese, who appeared to fit into American society so easily but yet were still very foreign and different, continuing to constitute an exotic threat. Unlike Cheng Huan, Tori has the ability to move much more freely within white society. Cheng's Chinese robes, his shop, and his home in the Chinese area of the Limehouse district segregate him from the rest of society. He is forever kept in an Asian sphere of

[31] Lesage, "Artful Racism, Artful Rape": 51.

existence. But Tori is a mixture of Eastern and Western cultures.[32] Tori, with his exotic home and his socialisation with women, is built up as a sensual, less masculine character and a persistent threat to white women, especially since he is always within the feminine sphere.[33] Like other women within the film, he is usually seen within the home, while Richard and other men work and are only seen at home after work. Even Tori's downfall does not come at the hands of a man. Richard only finds him wounded; it is Edith who shoots him, and she later brings him down further with the revelation of her scar in court.

The representation of miscegenation between whites and Asians by both Griffith and DeMille differs markedly from other representations of miscegenation between whites and other racial groups. While miscegenation is at all times condemned and presented as an evil to be avoided, the characterisations of the male Others are extremely different. African Americans and Native Americans are usually a sexual and physical threat. While Asians are a sexual threat, their physical strength is never emphasised. Rather it is their exclusion from the mainstream of society, their ability to mix with women, and their ability to adapt themselves to a different environment that makes them such a threat. Although there are marked differences between the characterisations of Cheng Huan and Tori, they are still both slight men, who are always on the edges of society, and who impress women with attributes that have nothing to do with their physical prowess. In the case of Cheng Huan, it is his gentleness to Lucy; in the case of Tori, it is his fabulous wealth and his exoticism that makes him

[32] Sumiko Higashi provides an analysis of the film, not only in terms of its representations of racial difference, but also in terms of the modern, more materialist culture in which the film was made. Higashi, *Cecil B. De Mille and American Culture*, 100-112.

[33] Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 25-26.

attractive to Edith. Yet both Cheng Huan and Tori are dangerous because they do not arouse people's suspicions and can disappear into the crowd. The depictions of Asians as a dangerous and exotic threat to whites would exist on the screen for many years, and often the supposed danger fluctuated depending on international events or on the United States's relations with the country of origin.[34]

Conclusion

Mainstream Hollywood films dealing with Asian/white miscegenation were often grounded in stereotypes of Asian exoticism and sexuality that existed in the traditional American cultural view of Orientals and the Orient. Yet these films also allowed more in-depth analyses of such relationships and why they occurred, something that almost never happened in films about black/white and Indian/white relationships. In many cases, this was because the relationships between blacks and whites and Indians and whites had occurred for a much longer period and the stereotypes that had been developed concerning these relationships had been so long entrenched in the white American psyche that it was almost impossible to separate the reality from the legend. In the case of Asians, because of their relatively recent immigration into the United States and the primarily localised ill-feeling against them, limited mainly to the West Coast, the stereotypes of the villainous Asian or the sexualised Asian were not as established in American popular culture. Although representations of Asians borrowed heavily from already existing stereotypes of Asian men as feminised, exotic, or domestic threats, in many films they often had greater depth in their characterisations than African Americans or Native

[34] Kevin Brownlow, *Behind the Mask of Innocence: Sex, Violence, Crime: Films of Social Conscience in the Silent Era* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990), 348-49.

Americans.

Representations of interracial relationships between Asians and whites, while often racist and stereotyped, were still presented in a more sympathetic manner than interracial relationships whites had with other ethnic groups. Although the relationships between whites and Asians often end with the death of one of the partners, the death occurs only after there is a build-up of the relationship and the development of the characters themselves. Often these representations were also reflections of anxieties many Americans felt about these ethnic groups. At the same time, however, the film industry would make adjustments to Asian representations if pushed by a foreign government, as happened with Tori, whose nationality was changed to Burmese when the film was re-released after protests by the Japanese government.

Unlike most representations of miscegenation with other racial groups, in many instances of Asian miscegenation the Asian partner is often socially and economically superior to their white partner. In films that concern Asian and white relationships, miscegenation is not a subplot, but often the major story in the film. In treating Asian and white relationships in this way, the film industry showed a distinct difference in the way it treated Asian/white relationships from other interracial relationships, which were often seen as peripheral. By foregrounding miscegenation between Asians and whites, the film industry seemed to indicate that, while these relationships were still not acceptable, they were far less controversial to show on screen than other examples of miscegenation. Although most relationships between Asians and whites were not allowed to end happily, the relationships between the couples were presented more comprehensively, and more sympathetically, than

other examples of miscegenation.

Filmography

The Cheat (dir. Cecil B. DeMille; performers: Sessue Hayakawa, Fannie Ward, Jack Dean; Famous Players Lasky/Paramount, 1915)

Broken Blossoms (dir. D. W. Griffith; performers: Lillian Gish, Richard Barthelmess, Donald Crisp; United Artists/D.W. Griffith, 1919)

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