COMMUNICATING RACE AND CULTURE IN MEDIA: APPROPRIATING THE

ASIAN IN AMERICAN MARTIAL ARTS FILMS

By

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Abstract

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This study attempted to explore the portrayals of Whites and Asians in present Hollywood major releases featuring martial arts. With the purpose of revealing how whiteness is strategically deployed in filmic form, this study analyzed plots and the dialogues between major movie characters, as well as the characterizations of different actors/actresses. The intent was to find clues to the appropriation of Asianness. Hence, two major research questions were proposed:

RQ1: How have martial arts, as an Asian cultural artifact, come to be appropriated by Whites in Hollywood-made martial arts films?

RQ2: How do these cultural appropriations communicate images of white American culture and the culture of ethnic minorities?

The results showed that five factors were indispensable for securing White centrality and for strategically promoting White superiority through the films under analysis. These were: (a) Whites' ethnic position backed up by Asians; (b) Whites'

speed of mastering martial arts; (c) defeating Asian villains by the Whites; (d) the

support to Whites from Asians; and (e) Asian roles being restricted. They served well

as the strategic basis of subconsciously (if not intentionally) sending messages

emphasizing Whiteness and appropriating Asian culture to the global audience.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother and father

who have been providing me with love and courage

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In addition to pursuing maximum profits for investors, Hollywood movies, as a

very important part of American popular culture, exert tremendous influence on

viewers' understanding and attitudes toward cultural issues (Kroes, 1999; Van Elteren,

2004). On the one hand, mainstream audiences (White viewers, predominantly, in the

U.S.) want to see images and stories that are close to their own lives; on the other, they

are curious about the world outside their own country, and people and culture other

than American. To this end, regardless of historical facts, Hollywood has had a history

of presenting heroes from a white Eurocentric perspective (Shohat & Stam, 1994;

Willis, 1997; Berg, 2008). We have seen small groups of Whites defeating hordes of

Native Americans, conquering tribesmen in Africa, putting down Indian rebellions and

outsmarting Latinos, Blacks, Asians, etc. This dominance of the White heroes in

movies serves as a way of communicating information about race to the rest of the

world that presents and maintains the image of the superiority of Whites, and

specifically White American culture to other cultures (Eze, 1997; Said, 1993, 1994;

Estrada, 2008). As Sorrells (2002) points out, the appropriation of cultural forms (such

as marital arts, and other forms of cultural artifacts) from "Others" enacts an imperial

mindset that only values the appropriators rather than the owners of these cultural

artifacts. This cultural and racial imperialism in films seems to cut across a variety of

genres which raises the questions: 'How are Asian martial arts appropriated by Whites

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in movies? How do these appropriations communicate images of White American culture and the culture of ethnic minorities?'

In order to answer these questions, this thesis examines the appropriation of Asianness in martial arts films. It looks at how White actors have over time assumed the roles of protagonists in the martial arts genre; how the White actor as hero has impacted the roles of Asians in these movies; how Asianness is now represented in terms of the Asian culture of martial arts, namely Kung Fu, Karate, Tae Kwando and various other forms of traditional Asian fighting. This study intends to analyze dialogues, plots and characterizations of different actors/actresses in several popular Hollywood movies to demonstrate the new trend of Hollywood movie production today: appropriating Asianness in once Asian-dominated Hollywood martial arts movies.

Racial images being inaccurately or even negatively portrayed and perpetuated through Hollywood movies greatly affect American audiences' accuracy and objectiveness in understanding minority cultures in American society (Gandy, 1998; Greenberg, Mastro, & Brand, 2002; Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004). In the 1970s, martial arts were introduced into Hollywood movies with the stardom of Bruce Lee in such movies as *Fists of Fury* and *The Chinese Connection*. For the first time, an Asian was actually the star of movie rather than the sidekick of the hero. The big screen delivered the message to American audiences that martial arts were something belonging to Asians, mysterious and dangerous. The skilled Asian fighter was a formidable human weapon as seen in movies by Bruce Lee, Wang Yu, Chen Sing and Shoghi Kishogi.

However, with more and more Hollywood major releases featuring Asian martial arts movies featuring White actors/actresses as protagonists, American movie makers seem to be redefining the culture of martial arts. The White characters in these recent releases are depicted as superior at learning and exercising Asian martial arts, which reflects "the tendency for dominant culture (Hollywood, America, White supremacy) to co-opt the styles and implied needs of subcultures, deracinate them and then produce something spectacularly conceited" (White, 2003, para. 6). Strong but clumsy big White guys who used to just flex useless muscles have suddenly become handy and tough martial arts experts.

Study Significance and Scope

The results of this study could be of significance to a variety of individuals. First, results could help give communication theorists new approaches to explaining how race is communicated and identities are formed in media. Second, the results of this study could help practitioners such as movie producers and directors to understand the impact on presentation of culture in a globalized world when Asianness is appropriated in film. Finally, the critical approach used in this study may assist communication scholars and researchers in applying other methodologies and using critical race theory (CRT) to help deconstruct the interaction of media and race in the communication of culture.

This current research will study how Hollywood-made Asian martial arts movies appropriate "Asianness" by analyzing discourse, plots, and characterizations

adopted in several notable Hollywood movies. In this study, Asianness is used to mean

typical Asian cultural artifacts, particularly martial arts. Therefore, the researcher will

use a critical race theory approach as the theoretical framework and restrict the study to:

a discussion of the general history of martial arts movies, representation of Asians and

communication of Asian culture in martial arts films, whiteness as property and

whiteness as performance, media construction of whiteness as reality. This study will

not examine non-Hollywood movies – such as Bollywood movies – movies whose

genres are not Asian martial arts.

General Background

In previous studies, some researchers (Hall, 1995; Rhodes, 1993; Shohat &

Stam, 2000) have studied the role of racist ideologies in media, while some others

(Dyer, 1988; Foster, 2003; Vera & Gordon, 2003) have examined whiteness in film in

terms of characterizations and representations. Also, many communication scholars,

such as Deloria (1998), Huhndorf (2001), Root (1996), and Ziff and Rao (1998), have

studied Whites' cultural appropriation of Native American culture and practices. The

present study will lay out several distinctive similarities between these

characterizations and appropriations and the depictions of Whites mastering Asian

martial arts in these Hollywood-made movies. The present study will also show how

whiteness is deployed, specifically through intercultural activities in filmic settings,

through factors common to all of the movies analyzed.

In some of the most current Hollywood martial arts movies, there are several

SYMBOLISMS that help illustrate the cultural appropriation by whiteness. First, there is the White protagonists' supernormal speed in acquiring and mastering Asian martial arts; second, the necessary defeat of an evil character played by an Asian actor/actress; and third, the subordinate roles played by one or several other Asian actors/actresses to show their kindliness and generous support of the White hero (Tierney, 2006).

In the present study, several recent Hollywood major releases featuring Asian martial arts will be analyzed. By critically examining the scripts of all the films for analysis and viewing every movie repeatedly, the researcher will analyze the plot, the dialogues between major movie characters, and the characterizations of different actors/actresses to explore possible clues to the appropriation of Asianness. Then the researcher will categorize and organize different emerging themes and compare these themes with previous study results.

<u>Organization of the Present Study</u>

This study consists of a general introduction of the problem of appropriation in Hollywood-made martial arts movies. Chapter 2 begins by presenting the conceptual framework, Critical Race Theory, that is the basis of this study followed by a literature review of studies done on whiteness in films, the role of racist ideology in media, Whites' cultural appropriation of minority's cultural practices, the definition of whiteness, and the history of Hollywood martial arts films featuring Asians. Chapter three is a discussion of the method. The last two chapters include the analysis, the results, and the discussion of limitations and possible future studies on this topic.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter examines past literature relevant to the present study on the

appropriation of Asians in Hollywood martial arts films. The study will be started by

examining how movies and films as a part of American culture exert worldwide

influence on people's understanding of different cultures. Second, a discussion of the

theoretical framework Critical Race Theory (CRT) will be presented in this study.

Researchers have found this paradigm particularly useful when looking at how racism

is maintained through mass media, how media construct realities to portray racial

stereotypes, how power is involved when discussing the relationship between race and

communication, and reason why whiteness as property needs to be studied as a symbol

of power and domination (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Valdes, Culp, & Harris, 2002). In the

third part, the study presents an overview of the literature that looks at how whiteness is

communicated to consumers through film. In the next two sections, the beginning and

development of American martial arts films and the images of Asians' portrayal in

them will be briefly explored.

Cultural Impact of American-Made Movies

It is true that film production in the United States is a business whose ultimate

purpose is to make a profit for investors (Horak, 2001). Nevertheless, the movie is also

considered to be an important art form, a source of popular entertainment and a

powerful method for educating – or indoctrinating – citizens (Bandura, 1986). Films, in

a sense, are cultural artifacts created by specific cultures, which reflect those cultures,

and, in turn, affect them (Wildman & Siwek, 1988; Kahn, 1995, Gandy, 1998). The

visual and audio elements of cinema give motion pictures a universal power of

communication.

The United States is a very influential power in terms of cultural invasion (Mair,

1998). The advance in telecommunication technology has helped transfer American

culture and values all around the world. As an inseparable part of that culture,

Hollywood films are labeled "eye-catching" because of their high investment and

advanced technological support. By using dubbing or subtitles that translate the

dialogue, many Hollywood films have become popular worldwide attractions. However,

in addition to mainstream "White" stories, Hollywood has found a need for more story

lines from other cultures. Using racial icons is regarded as an effective way to reflect

other cultures and their values.

Hollywood, as an important part of American mainstream media, has the power

to outline similarities and differences, to set and limit boundaries, and to reproduce and

perpetuate ideologies that assist with maintaining the existing situations (Marchetti,

1993). Hollywood films have always been indicators of America's attitudes to whatever

they portray, positive or negative, intentionally or unintentionally (Cho, Hsiao, Hsu, &

Wang, 1999). Granted that it is possible that the growing number of certain movie

genres (e.g., comedies) starring racial minorities has facilitated racial tolerance in the

mainstream mass media, a series of critical studies reveal that not only is the racial

hierarchy a crucial part of these films but also that the characters consistently conform

to negative minority stereotypes that can be deemed racist (Park, Gabbadon, & Chernin,

2006). Therefore, the racial images portrayed and perpetuated through Hollywood films

greatly affect American audiences' accuracy and objectivity of understanding minority

cultures (Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Native American) that are different from the

"White" culture.

Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT). The beginning of

CRT was marked by what is now called the "Alternative Course", which was initiated

when professor of law Derrick Bell quit his teaching position at Harvard Law School

where he felt that current courses did not reflect the reality of how minorities were

treated by the legal system in the United States (Freeman, 1995; Greene, 1995). The

Alternative Course brought together a group of scholars of color from around the nation

whose interests were in race, racism, and American law. This circle slowly found a

strong connection with Critical Legal Studies (CLS) but later felt the need to separate

from CLS. Eventually, that group of people named themselves CRT scholars in 1980s

and CRT was formally established.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) originally was a somewhat limited and subjective

approach that emphasized that the nature of race was socially constructed, regarded

judicial solutions to be the consequence of power, and rejected all forms of non-White

subordination (Cho & Westley, 2002; Bell, 1995). This method of inquiry is an

extended branch of Critical Legal Studies pertaining to issues of racism and racial

discrimination (Freeman, 1995; Dalton, 1995; Cook, 1995). Well-known critical race

theorists such as Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, Gloria

Ladson-Billings, and Neil Gotanda were representatives of the notions of the social

construction of race and racial subordination/discrimination; recently emerging CRT

scholars, including Adrienne Dixson, Celia Rousseau, and Thandeka Chapman also

contributed a lot to the development of such topics. In addition, pioneers in sociology,

such as W.E.B. DuBois and Max Weber, also made their contributions to the shaping

and progress of CRT.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged in part from the milieu of Critical Legal

Studies (CLS), a field of inquiry that argues that preserving the interests of power,

rather than the demands of principle and precedence, is the guiding force behind legal

judgments (Crenshaw, 1995; Lull, 2003). Moreover, CRT further recognized that in

order to address race problem in the US, development in institutional politics and

intellectual inquiries were essential (Chang, 2002; Crenshaw, 2002). Currently, the

understanding and application of CRT has expanded and has demonstrated its

usefulness not only in addressing race, gender and class issues, but also in

contemplating liberal defenses of affirmative action, left-liberal discourses on

globalization, and racialist responses to post-civil rights retrenchment as well (Romany,

2002; Greene, 1995; Kennedy, 1995). Many researchers have used CRT in their studies

to investigate race, gender, and class issues in areas related to communication. For example, Hall (2003) looked at the racist ideologies in the media from a White angle; Coleman (2003) studied the portrayals of black people in TV sitcoms; Perry (2003) investigated the image of black female artists in Hip Hop music; Sun (2003) studied Ling Woo's role in the popular soap opera *Ally McBeal* to reveal the new face of Asian American stereotypes on TV; Antler (2003) looked at the inaccurate portrayal of Jewish women in American mass media, and discussed the negative consequences of this misrepresentation; Jhally (2003) studied the relationship between advertising and popular culture by focusing on racial images; and Shim (1998) investigated the yellow face portrayed in mass media that stereotypically indicated Chinese. All of these studies employed CRT as their theoretical guidance, which offers a new perspective for exploring mass communication media.

　　Race and Communication. From a critical point of view, the influence of racism is maintained through communication. According to Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, people form their values and beliefs by observing and learning the behaviors and attitudes of others around them. According to many critical communication researchers and scholars (e.g., Van Dijk, 1994; Gandy, 1998), social learning is not limited to direct personal contacts or experiences; rather, it can also be attained through communication, especially through exposure to mass communication media. According to Gandy (1998), human beings tend to have expectations of the other party/parties they interact with in terms of their behavior(s). On the one hand, these expectations come

from their past interpersonal communication experiences in similar situations; on the other, they come from observing how others interact and behave on occasions they have not yet experienced before (e.g., interacting with and perceiving members from other racial groups, or from other cultures). These occasions may be totally different from our daily routines, and we tend to look for guidance from mass communication media as an important source of observation for properly dealing with the situations in which we lack direct real-world experience in personal contact (Bandura, 1986; Gerbner, 1973; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994). Combs and Slovic (1979) suggest that there is a very close match between media presentation and our beliefs. That is to say, it is true that we tend to believe what we see that is presented by the mass media. In other words, media help us interpret reality. However, it is also the truth that what we see today has been carefully and intentionally selected, structured, and possibly negatively modified for some strategic purposes.

Through the use of language, symbols, and interpersonal communication, individuals are likely to establish well-formed impressions and conceptions toward members from different social and racial groups when they become adults through the process of combining personal experience and the information inculcated by mass communication media in regard to racial groups unfamiliar to their own (Hamilton & Trolier, 1986). Part of these impressions and conceptions are later recognized as racial stereotypes that are reinforced, perpetuated, and difficult to change with the direct help of our own personal experience, and the indirect help of various forms of

communication, such as different mass communication media. In spite of the fact that

the symbolic content of our social communication is created by human labor, and hence

possibly represents individual opinions, we must realize that mass media products are

to a large degree controlled and influenced by capitalists and market needs (Iglesias,

2002; Winant, 2001; Downing & Husband, 2005; Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2003).

Therefore, the drive for profitability in today's capitalist society is argued to be

primarily responsible for the reproduction and perpetuation of racial stereotypes. In

addition, Gandy (1998) suggests that factors such as media technology, media

ownership, finance, market demographics, and audience preferences also play

important roles in the process of mass media's misrepresentation of racial "Others"

over a long period of time. By understanding that stereotypes are used to aid our social

communication and perception, we can move on to the next part to see how stereotypes

are constructed as reality by the mass communication media.

Media's Construction of Reality by Portraying Stereotypes. Media help us

construct our various realities. Information is usually processed and transformed into

stereotypes for purpose of better or easier comprehension (Tajfel, 1981). However,

stereotype used to be defined, in the first place, as the picture for reproducing people

from the same/similar social category/categories (Lippman, 1922). Stereotype's

definition has been extended to mental beliefs that are over-generalized (Allport, 1954).

Since human brains don't have capacity large enough to store and process incoming

information (Lang & Friestad, 1993), we tend to form stereotypes to handle

complicated information from the world around us (Hamilton & Trolier, 1986.)

Therefore, stereotypes serve as simple solutions to sophisticated social phenomena and

assist us with categorizing different social groups.

As social communication agents, the mass media are responsible for delivering

information to the broad mass audience and often results in stereotypes (Stangor &

Schaller, 2000). On the societal level, racial and ethnic stereotypes are reproduced and

distributed by the mass media. According to Gandy (1998), two aspects of media

content have been identified by communication scholars that are especially important in

the reproduction of racism: a) the accuracy of media content representation, and b) the

accuracy of media's reflection of social reality. The completeness of representations of

racial and ethnic groups and their relations with other members in society are perceived

to have important consequences for developing their self-image and personal identity.

The consequence is that misrepresentation of a certain racial group could harm a young

generation by potentially destroying their self-image and confidence and possibly

create a negative impression towards their own culture and racial group (Antler, 2003).

Communications scholars have also focused on how biased mass media

representation threatens the ability of individuals, or society as a whole, to make

informed choices (Wilson, Gutierrez, & Chao, 2003; Andersen, 1995; Gandy, 1998). In

the past, the impact of television and cinema on viewers was once assumed to be huge

and that the audiences were just passive receivers (Fiske, 1987 & 1982; McQuail,

1983). Although this viewpoint was revised with new mass communication research,

and it was claimed that the audience could make critical/oppositional readings to counter the power of media Morley (1992) still claims, "The power of viewers to reinterpret meanings is hardly equivalent to the discursive power of centralized media institutions to construct the texts which the viewer then interprets" (p.31). This clearly indicates that the audiences are not unlikely to be influenced by the reality constructed by the mass media. Taking cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1973; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994) as an example, we can conclude that the more we are exposed to the messages from mass media (TV and film) the more we are likely to believe in the world portrayed in the media and the message delivered by them to be real and true.

Results from research conducted both inside (Gilens, 1996; Rada, 2000) and outside (e.g., Tan, Li, & Simpson, 1986; Wiedmann, 1984) the United States show us that the frequency of watching TV does exert a tremendous impact on forming stereotypes of different racial groups. In addition, individuals' decision-making (even routine tasks) is guided by models of social reality. However, as Giddens (1984) suggests, individuals' knowledge about these models is always limited or incomplete. Therefore, their decision-making could be affected or even worse, totally controlled by biased information environments constructed by mass communication media. Individuals make use of and rely on the mass media for decision-making references, and in their assessment of the validity of personal and culturally privileged theories about the nature of the world (Ball-Rokeach et al., 1984; Van Dijk, 1992). If individuals are not using the function of surveillance of mass media (news) as the

sources for assessing the validity of that information environment created by mass media, fictional media (TV and films) can be possibly turned to for similar functions (Gerbner et al., 1986). Thus, fictional and non-fictional forms are responsible for the construction of social realities in which we live our daily routines.

Because of these reasons, the performance of the mass media ought to be evaluated in terms of the quality of its representation of the lives of minority racial groups other than that of the dominant Whites. At this point, a concern with media representation is a concern with its impact on individuals, groups, and entire societies (Devine, 1989; Shohat & Stam, 1994). This is a concern being emphasized about how communications affect the distribution of power. Some scholars (Lasswell et al., 1949) believe that symbols, including words and images, do affect power as they also affect expectations of power. Gandy (1998) furthered this belief by contending that symbols affect assumptions about the legitimacy of power as well.

"White Power". Critical communication scholars emphasize power and influence when talking about relationship between communication and race. From the very beginning, CRT has targeted the American legal system and supreme courts that granted and empowered White superiority and privilege, rather than discouraging and banishing it (Delgado, 1995). This power is different from our traditional understanding of physical or natural forces; but rather, this is a power on a level of social theory and conceptualization. However, different theorists have different perception of this conceptualized power. Some have argued that power should not be studied and

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understood along with communication theory (Krippendorff, 1995) so that we can grasp the essence of each field better. Others have regarded power as an indispensably fundamental reality of human life that helps explain the relationship between the oppressing and the oppressed (Wartenberg, 1992). The study of power was even related to the capacity and intelligence of different racial groups to justify that skin color is not merely difference of outer appearance for classifying races, but a significant factor that influenced social relations of power (Gandy, 1998).

It was the belief of the Frankfurt School and Marxian political economists that there was an apparent link between media ownership and media content. Given the fact that most mainstream media are owned/controlled by Whites, the content provided by these media apparently has the power granted by legislation to affect or even control how audience understands and perceives certain racial groups in American society. This is likely to be the reason why the Frankfurt School had since long defined media as a 'culture industry' (Gandy, 1998). However, the Frankfurt School never did relate their critiques with race when talking about media as a culture industry. Other critical scholars have variously viewed mass communication media as structures (Becker, 1979), and systems (Murdock and Golding, 1979), and they were all inevitably related to economic and market factors. Talking about media as a structural system that helps in creating stereotypical racial images, we must mention the famous symbolic interactionist approach from the Chicago School that is focused on how social structure and physical environment influence individual behavior. The symbolic content from the

mass media can selectively create an environment that favors whiteness, while misrepresenting racial "Others", to powerfully influence individual behaviors in relation to racial awareness and conception, and decision-making during their social interactions (Shohat & Stam, 1994; Lichter et al, 1994).

Surprisingly, although race has been a permanent issue consciously and selectively produced, reproduced and perpetuated in mass communication media, its place in the culture industry has rarely been the focus of critical theory studies due to its complexity (Gandy, 1998). In American main stream media, whiteness has long been empowered and naturalized as unchallengeable common sense (Frankenberg, 1993). The typical holding about whiteness is that Whites are, first and foremost, human beings. Thus, whatever human beings do is acceptable because it is rendered "natural". Whites' being appropriated as "human" is an ideological strategy of whiteness. Through its use, Whites' behavior becomes "natural," and hence wrongful and unreasonable to be criticized. By naturalizing "White", "whiteness eludes any possibility of recognizing power relations" (Nakayama & Krizek, 1999, p.99) that are rendered invisible or even not existing but are actually embedded within. Davies (1997) argued that this standpoint is particularly problematic because "the essential human being tends in any period to bear a striking resemblance to the dominant group of that time and place" (p. 59). Therefore, it may be argued that Whites' ability to appropriate cultural forms comes not from any human or natural right but from the power and privilege that membership in the dominant group of society grants. As the dominant

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racial group in American society, Whites established the legal system and passed legislations to favor so-called "natural human needs" so as to render whiteness invisible (Dyer, 1988; Hanke, 1992), and mass communication media was a tool with the power to influence media products' recipients in terms of their understanding of certain culture (Winant, 1997).

In summary, being White in the United States is not only indicative of status; it also brings treasured privileges and benefits in a society built upon racial caste. Many critical scholars argue that whiteness becomes a piece of priceless property (Bentham, 1978; Minogue, 1980; Roediger, 1999). Harris (1995) argued that although whiteness as property was empowered by political and legal agents, it inevitably imposed more profoundly negative impact on ameliorating the situation of racial injustice in American society in return. Thus, whiteness as property needs to be studied as a symbol of power and domination. In the next section, I will specifically examine whiteness, including its definitions and how whiteness is communicated through one form of mass communication media – films.

Whiteness as Performance

Whiteness, also termed White privilege, White superiority, or White supremacy, is concerned with the social, political and cultural advantages accorded to Whites in American society, which seem invisible to most Whites, but obvious to non-White groups (Hall, 1992; Ware, 1992; Roediger, 1999; Frankenberg, 1997). According to Frankenberg (1993), whiteness is conceptualized and framed to be three interrelated

phenomena. Whiteness is "first, a location of structural advantage, of race privilege; second, a 'standpoint,' a place from which White people look at themselves, at others, and at society; and third, whiteness refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed" (p. 1). It can be easily inferred from these statements that whiteness is a socially constructed form of ideology associated with social status.

Whiteness used in various recently Hollywood-released martial arts films tends to help defend and perpetuate the consolidation of Whites and normal human behaviors to rationalize and disguise the appropriation of other cultures as a normal, harmless, natural behavior, and to promote Whites' ability and possibilities of going beyond ethnicity that is not equally represented for non-White racial groups. Gray's (1995) claiming whiteness to be a "consistent object of ridicule, satire, and commentary" (p.141) may well illustrate the racist cognitive hidden beneath the naturalization of whiteness. As will be shown, the actions of the White protagonists' seeking to emulate or imitate the actions or beliefs of someone, racially and culturally different from themselves in the films, are not casual and well-intended intercultural exchange. White protagonist's actions of crossing ethnocultural boundaries with the purpose of enriching his/her own life experience seem to be entitled as a normal "human" need and this should be perceived as totally acceptable and understandable (Root, 1996).

To expose the hidden strategies that define and preserve the centrality of whiteness in mass communication media (films in particular), Nakayama and Krizek (1999) used their strategic rhetoric framework to analyze the deployment of whiteness

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through dialogue, narrative, and characterizations in different forms of American mass media. The whiteness in recently released martial arts films to be analyzed, rationalize and validate the cultural appropriations for the White protagonist, which assist him/her in establishing who and what a White people can be, what others can and cannot do and/or be, and what kind of feeling and action by others is allowed or disallowed regarding who a White can be, and what he/she can do. Because film is a globally distributed form of mass communication media, the whiteness themes, and the strategies used to naturalize and rationalize them, will have a broader impact than individuals' dissemination of whiteness (Winant, 1997; Fine et al, 1997; Phoenix, 1998).

Hollywood-Made Martial Arts Films Featuring Asians

The martial arts film, as a distinct American film genre, originated in Asia and first gained widespread popularity in America in the 1970s with the rise to stardom of Bruce Lee. In 1973, with the release of a large handful of dubbed imports from Hong Kong, including and especially *Five Fingers of Death* and Bruce Lee's *Fists of Fury* and *The Chinese Connection*, Hollywood immediately joined the crew for making martial-arts films. But unfortunately, Bruce Lee's untimely death before the release of what would be his blockbuster, mainstream big shot, *Enter the Dragon*, put the newly born American-made martial arts genre in Hollywood on suspension until Chuck Norris knocked in and established a truly American martial arts genre with *Good Guys Wear Black* in 1979. From then on, martial arts returned to American theaters but with a

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significant shift in the ethnic makeup of the martial arts stars. The martial-arts film may be said to be one in which the protagonist or protagonists are skilled in Asian martial arts and put such skill to use in progression of the story. However, Bruce Lee's absence gave White actors, such as Chuck Norris, Jean Claude Van Damme, and Steven Seagal, the opportunity of becoming the new-generation "martial arts" stars. By inviting Kung Fu choreographer, such as Wo-Ping Yuen (who has choreographed and designed action sequences for many major Hollywood releases, like *the Matrix* trilogy, *Charlie's Angels*, *Kill Bill*, and *The Forbidden Kingdom*), Hollywood has been able to "reassert its hegemony" (Lo, 2001) in martial arts film production.

Actually, martial arts remain inadequately explored and defined. We all know that featuring a broad and varied category (as martial arts include many skills with different styles that were developed in several Asian cultures), martial arts are quite distinct from Western fighting skills, such as boxing or fencing in terms of the fighting styles. Despite containing unarmed and weapons styles, martial arts have been developed with the combination of both styles to cater to filmic needs for Hollywood martial arts films. Martial arts genre in today's film making (especially Hollywood film production) has become either a subgenre under the title of action/adventure/science-fiction films (e.g., *Indiana Jones* series, *the Matrix* trilogy, and *Kill Bill*), or a mega-genre featuring various subgenres. Nevertheless, as a genre with mainstream, cult, and exploitation appeal (Desser, 2000), American martial arts

films, a product of blending different cultures, have much to offer as cultural mirror and cultural critique.

History of Hollywood Martial Arts Films: Actors and Actresses Portrayed

Interestingly, we may notice that martial arts heroes have mostly been portrayed as male heroes on the big screens by American filmmakers. The situation for Asian actresses is quite different. Asian female martial artists have long been playing supporting roles either when they were in non-Hollywood martial arts movies, or when they starred in Hollywood action films (e.g., Ziyi Zhang in *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, and in *Rush Hour 2*).

There seems to be two contradictory stereotypes of Asian martial art heroes created by Hollywood. According to Isaacs (1980), images of Asians portrayed in American media tend largely to come in mutually opposing pairs: superior and inferior people; devilishly vicious barbarians and perfectly attractive civilians; wise figures and foolish illiterates; noble and honorable heroes and devil-like villains; Beijing opera artists and actual well-trained fighters. These and many other pairs occur and recur with the development of Hollywood movies (from black & white silents to color films with sound).

These contrasting characteristics can be seen in Asian male martial arts heroes in Hollywood movies featuring Asian themes at different times. For example, the Asian male is portrayed as a sexually active hero (e.g., Bruce Lee, who had been displaying a unique type of Chinese masculinity by acting as fearless warrior), sexless passive hero

(e.g., Charlie Chan, who represents both Yellow Face and the Asian Passive Hero, decorated with "Confucian wisdom" [Isaacs, 1980, p.119]), sexless active hero (e.g., Jackie Chan, and Jet Li, whose roles were always heroes without romantic affairs with female in the movies), and heartless demonized villains (e.g., Fu Manchu, and the Jade Warlord, who showed nothing but horrifying and mystified qualities that are imposed by Hollywood on Asians as their negative dark side). The reasons for these contradictions are more or less due to old Americans' attitudes toward Asian immigrants, and to American media's wrongfully stereotypical representation of Asian images throughout American media history (Cho, Hsiao, Hsu & Wang, 1999).

The Trend in Today's Hollywood Martial Arts Films

Changing Situations. Asian martial arts, an Asian cultural artifact that has a global presence and yet a distinct cultural origin, is now perceived differently and operationalized from a White angle. In spite of the fact that Hollywood presented its own American martial arts heroes, such as Jean Claude van Damme, Steven Seagal, and Chuck Norris to name a few, Asian actors/actresses have long been viewed as absolutely irreplaceable martial arts masters in Hollywood movies. This is mainly because while in some Asian countries (e.g., Japan and China), martial arts are part of the native cultures, you cannot find the equivalent in the United States, where there is no original and indigenous martial arts (West, 2006). The situation is being changed now. Mastering martial arts is no longer Asian-only. More and more movies are using

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Asians in supporting roles to "amplify, reify, or validate" (Tierney, 2006, p.618) that of

White actors, which reflects an obvious cultural colonialist mindset (Young, 1990).

Appropriating through Cultural Imperialism. American filmmakers seem to be

conveying the idea that people from minority cultures should not have any role in the

crossing of cultural lines in an American-made cultural product. That is to say, martial

arts are no longer Asian-only skills, and Whites should have the ability to learn to

master martial arts, which opens the door for American filmmakers to make more

varied movie types that could be commercially successful. In the movies under analysis

(*Kill Bill*, *The Last Samurai*, *Bulletproof Monk*, *The Forbidden Kingdom*, *The Mummy:*

Tomb of the Dragon Emperor), the seemingly fierce and undefeatable Asian characters

(most of them are the enemies of the heroes played by Caucasians) were all killed by

the White hero/heroine after a climatic fight in the end. This typifies White supremacy

by demonstrating that the ultimate Asian martial arts can be defeated by American

heroes who have mastered better or more effective skills (something like martial arts,

but apparently better).

However, to assume that an Asian figure in a Hollywood movie is good at

something that are Whites' specialty and can defeat White people in the end is

unimaginable or even hardly acceptable to American audiences. Tierney's (2006)

interesting comments can help illustrate this point: "imagine a noncomedic film in

which Tony Leung Chiu Wai becomes the greatest hockey player in America 6 months

after first picking up a stick, winning not only the Stanley Cup but the MVP award, or a

film where Djimon Hounsou wins a classical music competition in Paris less than a year after deciding to play the cello. One is even left to wonder how Western audiences would have received Stephen Chow's *Shaolin Soccer* had the climactic game featured Chow and his teammates defeating not another Asian team but England's Manchester United" (p. 621).

Stories like the above ones will definitely be considered inconceivalbe, or at least weird for White audiences and unacceptable to Hollywood filmmakers, not because they look unreal but because "imaginings of community by people of color are socially constrained by the politics of race that exclude non-Whites from crossing these boundaries but allow Whites to cross these boundaries into global imaginings" (Drzewiecka & Wong, 1999, p. 207). Undoubtedly, the current trend of mastering martial arts by White protagonists may be viewed as harmless and entertaining on the surface, but they assist in creating a significant filmic form of cultural imperialism and appropriation that perpetuates hegemonic ideas of racial and cultural superiority of White people and inferiority of people of color, which brings consequences that may reach far beyond the making and showing of films (Tierney, 2006).

When we compare White protagonists in today's martial arts movies with Asian protagonists in early martial arts movies, we easily find out that Whites are getting much handier in the field of martial arts, a field in which they used to be portrayed as clumsy and not good at in early movies of this kind. Given the above discussion about whiteness and cultural appropriation in media this study asks:

RQ1: How have martial arts, as an Asian cultural artifact, come to be appropriated by Whites in Hollywood-made martial arts films?

RQ2: How do these cultural appropriations communicate images of White American culture and the culture of ethnic minorities?

CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

Strategic Rhetoric Framework for Analyzing Whiteness

This chapter will discuss the research methods to be employed in the current

study to investigate how whiteness appropriates Asian culture in Hollywood-made

martial arts films. A slightly altered form of Nakayama and Krizek's (1995) strategic

rhetoric framework will be adopted for the current analysis of whiteness. Though not

officially deemed as a framework, the rhetoric strategies for investigating whiteness

were introduced by these two researchers for the purpose of deconstructing the rhetoric

of whiteness and exposing it as "a cultural construction as well as the strategies that

embed its centrality" (p. 297). As is suggested by previous studies in individual/public

discourse, and mass communication media (like TV programs and films), analysis of

dialogues, plots, and characterizations are effective means of examining whiteness as

strategic rhetoric (Tierney, 2006).

Based on Frankenberg's (1993) assumption that "whiteness changes over time

and space and is in no way a transhistorical essence" (p. 236), Nakayama and Krizek

(1995) describe whiteness as "complex and problematic" in our daily communication

interactions because it symbolizes a dynamic power line that secures and ensures the

place of whiteness in the everyday life of American society. In their study of whiteness

as a strategic rhetoric, Nakayama and Krizek (1995) concluded that whiteness is

"rhetorically constituted through discursive strategies that map the field of whiteness"

(p. 303).

Why Strategic Rhetoric Framework?

In order to "expose, examine, and disrupt" (p. 292) the "White" territory, and reveal the invisible position of whiteness for critical analysis, Nakayama and Krizek (1995) utilized combined data acquired from textual analysis of some popular discourse, open-ended surveys, and interviews to explore how whiteness is strategically deployed in our daily lives, and disseminated by the mass media. This was a new way of using strategic rhetoric to examine whiteness with major focus on analyzing individual and public discourse, through the analysis of textual data from mass media, like TV programs. Tierney (2006) modified this framework by extending its application to film studies, and explored whiteness themes in three Hollywood action movies featuring Asian martial arts and Asian plots. Tierney (2006) actually sets a theoretical and practical foundation viable for this current study to proceed.

Traditionally, analyzing public speeches used to be regarded as an effective approach to study rhetoric. However, in the late 20th century, the fact was that White public figures tended to unanimously avoid addressing the topic of whiteness, which made it difficult to capture whiteness themes by analyzing the public speeches made by these White figures. Unconsciously, whiteness seemed to become invisible in our day-to-day lives. Thus, Nakayama and Krizek (1995) argue that critically examining the strategic rhetoric of whiteness could better help us understand its influences on our everyday lives. They found it necessary to address more popular or commonly

everyday discourses publicized by mass communication media in order to further investigate whiteness that was hidden under the cover of articulation.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, as an important form of America's mass communication media, films also carry the important function of delivering messages to the broad audience and shaping their thoughts and understandings with regard to different "Others" and their cultures (Gandy, 1998; Marchetti, 1993; Cho, Hsiao, Hsu, & Wang, 1999). To reveal the strategically deployed whiteness that appropriates Asians and their cultures in the films to be analyzed in the current study, I believe that strategic rhetoric is a suitable mechanism for further explorations about how White protagonists' powers are granted and ensured throughout several different films. By employing the strategic framework, this study is expected to contribute to broadening the range of utilizing this framework, and enriching the methods for future CRT analysis. In addition, as is mentioned earlier in chapter one, the possible results of this study could be of significance to a variety of individuals: a) communication theorists can acquire new approaches for explaining how race is communicated and identities are formed in media; b) practitioners such as movie producers and directors, with the help of this study's results, can understand the impact on presentation of culture in a globalized world when Asianness is appropriated in film; c) communication scholars and researchers may be assisted by the critical approach applied in this study in applying other methodologies and using critical race theory (CRT) to help deconstruct the interaction of media and race in the communication of culture.

<u>Sampling</u>

The Forbidden Kingdom, *the Last Samurai*, *Kill Bill*, *Bulletproof Monk*, and *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* are the subjects of analysis in the present study because, a) all of these films were released by major Hollywood productions around the beginning of the 21st century, which marked the newer formation of hidden strategic whiteness; b) all of these films are major releases and are regarded as big screen hits, as all debuted in at least 3,000 release theaters across the U.S.; c) all of these films star White protagonists who were either battled by or supported by Asian martial arts figures featuring a plot of saving the world, and d) all of the protagonists are very handy martial arts performers who are able to master deadly techniques to defeat Asian villains. All of the interrelated factors make these Hollywood films ideal subjects for analyzing the strategic deployment of whiteness that has appropriated Asians in American martial arts films.

<u>Approach to Analysis</u>

As is suggested by previous studies in individual/public discourse, and mass communication media, like TV programs and films, analysis of dialogues, plots, and characterizations are effective means of examining whiteness as strategic rhetoric (Tierney, 2006). The current study will therefore analyze a) plots, storylines, and narratives in films that are strategically designed for cultural appropriation by whiteness; b) analyze the dialogues between White protagonist(s) and Asians in roles as Asian villain(s) and other supporting characters; and finally, (c) examine

characterizations of White protagonist(s)/hero(es) in recently-released martial arts films will be described and analyzed in order to compare them with that of Asian protagonist(s)/hero(es) portrayed in old martial arts films so that we can evaluate how the strategic deployment of whiteness is accomplished in all these Hollywood major releases featuring martial arts.

Plots. To analyze the plot of a film is to make clear about the arrangement of events within the film scripts. First, we must analyze the time and circumstances of the world in the film. For example, we need to know what the characters are doing at a certain time. Second, we should find out what happens to make a certain action start, and identify the main events that cause a major consequence (e.g., death of a certain character, a big explosion, a fierce fight, etc.). Third, we need to see how the events affect the actions of the characters, which leads us to reveal the cause-effect pattern of the plot setting at that specific point of time. Fourth and most importantly, we need to identify the main quest of the major character and how he/she fulfills this quest (Chatman, 1978; Armstrong, 2003). For example, a hero undertakes a dangerous mission to save his kingdom (the quest), and he has to go through all kinds of danger and experience a series of ordeals in the process of accomplishing this task (Bubert & Jenett, 2002). Finally, we should analyze how this major quest influences the major character(s), and find out how the main character has changed after going through all of these experiences (Bubert & Jenett, 2002). The analysis of plots in this study will mainly adhere to these steps and focus on the interaction between the White

protagonists and the Asian characters (including the Asian antagonists and other Asian supporting roles) in the films under analysis to reveal the whiteness themes.

Dialogues. Much research and analysis has been done to demonstrate how women and racial minority groups (African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans) have been inaccurately or even negatively portrayed in American films by researchers and scholars through merely studying the plots and characterizations of these films. According to Kozloff (2000), "what is often overlooked is how much the speech patterns of the stereotyped character contribute to the viewer's conception of his or her worth; the ways in which dialect, mispronunciation, and inarticulateness have been used to ridicule and stigmatize characters has often been neglected" (p. 27). Therefore, in addition to plots and characterizations, dialogue is always a good choice if we need to understand and explore how racial stereotypes and social prejudices are constructed in films.

Because dialogue in American films is important for us to understand and analyze American culture (Kozloff, 2000), it is necessary that we examine dialogue in films to analyze "what the characters say, how they say it, and how the filmgoer is influenced, as these are issues of power and dominance, of empathy and intimacy, of class, ethnicity, and gender that are automatically engaged every time someone opens his or her mouth."(p. 26). In the dialogue analysis for this study, the following factors will be considered when analysis is conducted: (a) tone (e.g., cold, warm, exciting, deep, etc.) of the speakers, which is a good reaction to the film storylines and

represents the actor's/actress' emotion toward the other people taking part in the

dialogue; (b) choice of words by the speakers, which can inform us directly of any

racial issues involved in the contact , (c) the circumstances or conditions under which

the dialogue takes place, and (d) the social background of characters attending the

conversation in the film. The integration of dialogue with other filmic elements (e.g.,

plot setting, characterization design, and special effects) makes audience fully informed

of every aspect of the story. By analyzing dialogue, we can have a more comprehensive

understanding of how White superiority is strategically communicated in the films

under analysis.

Characterizations. The characterizations of White protagonists in films could be

related to some typical hero types most commonly portrayed in past and present

American mass communication media. According to the literature, heroes in the past

were mostly and commonly characterized by a mixture of bravery and wisdom (Duke,

Goodman, and Sutherland, 2002), In addition to these qualities, modern heroes must

possess high social accomplishments and higher emotional intelligence (e.g., being

empathetic). It is not surprising, therefore, that today's mass media is constantly

creating and portraying hero figures, such as athletes from different fields, cops,

various figures from military forces, and secret agents hidden among us to uphold

justice.

Several different types of heroes are found in popular media. The first portrayed

hero type is the **self-sacrificing hero**. These types of heroes are those who are willing

to sacrifice their own properties (benefits, and even lives) for the benefit of others.

Jackie Chan's role in *The Medallion* and Tom Hank's role in *Saving Private Ryan* are

good examples of this type of hero. The second typical hero type is the **brave hero**.

Popular media tend to cover those fearless heroes with glory, and this is a mostly

recognized hero type for almost all audiences. Bruce Willis' cop role in *Die Hard*

sequels, Mel Gibson's role in *Braveheart*, Silvester Stallone in *Rambo* sequels, Jet Li's

role in *Kiss of the Dragon*, etc. are all vivid examples of brave hero types. The third

type of hero is the **noble hero** who features not only physical strength and intelligence,

but also countless trophies that glorify and honor him/her. Brad Pitt's role as the Greek

hero Achilles in *Troy* and Heather Ledger's role in *Knight's Tale* are typical examples of

this type of hero. The last hero type mostly portrayed is the **hero as savior**. This type of

hero usually shoulders a great many responsibilities that are beyond the capability of

ordinary human beings. Superman, Spiderman, and many others are all typical

representations of this type of hero. It is not unusual that sometimes, some

characterizations of them may overlap with that of other hero types. For example, Peter

Parker could also be categorized as a self-sacrificing hero type as he could not have the

life of a normal talented and promising university student.

Summary

This chapter presented the strategic rhetoric framework as the method to be

used for analyzing samples for this study, and clarified the reason for adopting this

framework for analysis. In the end, we also took a brief look at typical hero characters

portrayed and promoted by mass communication media as a preparation for analyzing

cultural appropriation by whiteness in American films in the following chapters. What

needs to be emphasized is that the focal point of this study is not the storytelling and

the business nature of Hollywood films. The analysis of dialogues, plots and

characterizations employed in the films under analysis to expose the strategically

deployed White superiority and centrality are based on the critical nature of Critical

Race Theory and Nakayama and Krizek's (1995) strategic rhetoric framework.

Therefore, the prospective results of this study might not ensure a balance between

subjectivity and objectivity. The next chapter will be devoted to analyzing the plots,

dialogue, and characterizations of the samples in details.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

In order to study how martial arts, as an Asian cultural artifact, is appropriated

by Whites in movies, and how these cultural appropriations communicate images of

White American culture and the culture of ethnic minorities, this chapter will analyze

five Hollywood major releases in the last decade in terms of a) their plots, b) dialogues

between the White heroes and the Asian villains, between the White heroes and the

Asian supporting roles, and c) the characterizations of the White protagonists, the Asian

antagonists, and the other supporting roles played by Asian actors/actresses portrayed

in theses films. The analysis will adopt a modified version of Nakayama and Krizek's

(1995) strategic rhetoric framework, which was previously used to analyze

individual/public discourse, and mass communication media (like TV programs and

films) for the purpose deconstructing the rhetoric of whiteness and exposing the

strategies that embedded its centrality, to reveal how whiteness is strategically hidden,

articulated and deployed in these major releases to communicate the viewpoint of

White's centrality and superiority to the audience.

<u>Major Storylines of Samples</u>

Five movies are analyzed in this study. These are: *The Last Samurai*, *Kill Bill*,

Bulletproof Monk, *The Forbidden Kingdom*, and *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon*

Emperor. In the following segment, the storylines of each film is described followed by

a more detailed discussion of the plots, dialogues, and characterizations employed in every film in order to uncover the whiteness themes.

The Last Samurai tells a story of Nathan Algren (Tom Cruise), an American Civil War veteran, who was hired by a Japanese Emperor and his newly founded cabinet to come to Japan to help train their soldiers to use modern weapons in order to repress the rebel samurai. However, Captain Algren was captured by the samurai army during a battle and kept hostage. As Algren got to know more about the samurai culture, he gradually became fascinated with it. Within several months, Algren joined the samurai community and mastered samurai swordsmanship, learning to use the katana. After the final battle between the samurai army and the government's army in which all other samurai warriors were killed, Algren becomes the last samurai. He went to the Emperor and told him about how the other samurai died and how they fought with honor. As the climax of the film, Omura (the bad guy who was only concerned about his own profit, and has killed many of his samurai compatriots) lost the Emperor's trust and the Americans' business because of Algren's showing up to tell the Emperor about the stories of all the dead Samurai warriors. The White protagonist is portrayed as a noble and brave hero in this film.

In *Bulletproof Monk*, a mysterious Tibetan monk (played by Chow Yun-Fat) has travelled for 60 years in search for his replacement to protect an ancient scroll – a scroll that holds the key to unlimited power. When he found Kar (Seann William Scott), a streetwise young man who thought that he had learned Kung Fu from the martial arts

films, the Monk decided to pass his guardianship of the scroll to him. The two became partners in a scheme to save the world from the scroll's most dangerous pursuer with the help of other Tibetan monks. In the process of protecting the scroll, the White protagonist, Kar, also learned some other martial art skills from the Monk (e.g., the technique of floating in the air). At the climatic ending of the film, Kar defeated the bad guy (Strucker, played by Karel Roden, who has been pursuing the scroll in an attempt to control the world with the help of its power) with the help of the Monk and the scroll. In this film, the White protagonist is depicted as a savior type of hero.

The movie *Kill Bill* tells the story of a Caucasian female assassin's revenge on her former boss and his assassin squad members. The Bride (Uma Thurman), a well-trained killer, was turned upon by the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad, led by Bill (David Carradine) who had almost shot her dead on her wedding rehearsal day. The Bride awoke four years later and set out to get vengeance on Bill and the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad. With the help of one of the best samurai swords made by one of Bill's former tutors, retired sword maker Hattori Hanzo (Sonny Chiba), the Bride took down the members of the Squad one by one. In the final climax sequence, the Bride used "the Five Point Palm Exploding-heart Technique" (a deadly killing skill taught by another tutor of Bill's, a Kung Fu master – Taoist Pai Mei, played by Gordon Liu) to kill Bill, as her revenge. The Bride is portrayed as a fearless-warrior type of heroine in this film.

In *The Forbidden Kingdom*, an American teenager Jason (Michael Angarano),

who is obsessed with Hong Kong Kung Fu films, finds an antique Chinese staff in a video-rental store in Boston's Chinatown. The staff turns out to have been the legendary weapon belonging to the Monkey King (Jet Li), a household sage figure in China. Jason was unexpectedly transported to ancient China by the staff and chosen as the traveler who would return the staff to free the Monkey King who had been imprisoned in stone by the evil Jade Warlord (Collin Chou) for five hundred years. There, he met the drunken Kung Fu master, Lu Yan (Jackie Chan) who, together with another skillful Kung Fu master the Silent Monk (Jet Li), became his mentors and Kung Fu teachers, and a Kung Fu beauty, Golden Sparrow (Liu Yifei) to assist him in accomplishing the mission. Along the way, Jason learned about honor, loyalty and friendship while practicing Kung Fu, and thus freed himself. With the intensive training, Jason quickly became a skillful Kung Fu boy. In the climatic ending, Jason killed the apparently stronger Jade Warlord with the help of Lu Yan, the Silent Monk, and Golden Sparrow, and fulfilled his mission of freeing the Monkey King by returning the staff. The White protagonist in this film is portrayed as a courageous and fearless hero.

The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor is the third sequel of the global blockbuster *The Mummy*. This time, the action shifts to Asia for the next chapter in this adventure series. Rick O'Connell (Brendan Fraser) and his grown-up son Alex (Luke Ford), together with his wife Evelyn (Maria Bello) and her brother Jonathan (John Hannah), explored the tomb of the resurrected ruthless Dragon Emperor (Jet Li) and his terracotta armies. With the help of an immortal sorceress Zi Yuan (Michelle Yeoh) and

her beautiful daughter Lin (Isabella Leong), the O'Connells succeeded in killing the merciless and seemingly undefeatable Emperor, and preventing his 10,000 mummy warriors from awakening. In this movie the White protagonists are depicted as brave savior-type heroes.

<u>Plots Analysis</u>

Rapid Supraethnic Mastery. The design and setting of the plots in Hollywood films featuring martial arts have never taken White ethnicity and identity to be an obstacle in acquiring martial arts skills that are marked by salient Asian ethnicity and culture. Learning martial arts is depicted as easy and fast for the White protagonists in the films under analysis. For example, Algren (Tom Cruise) was able to master the skills of Katana in *the Last Samurai*, the Bride (Uma Thurman) mastered the exquisite technique of samurai sword, and had learned the deadly kung fu techniques from Pai Mei in *Kill Bill*. Kar (Seann William Scott) in *Bulletproof Monk* and Jason (Michael Angarano) in *The Forbidden Kingdom* were all able to master Kung Fu without difficulties. The White protagonists are all portrayed as extremely talented and illuminable in the process of acquiring the martial arts skills without even understanding the essence behind these culturally rooted skills (Greenblatt, 1991).

In *Bulletproof Monk*, a highly respected and skilled Tibetan monk (Chow Yun-Fat) who was designated to take care of a Tibetan scroll conveying ultimate power, travelled across the world for 60 years in search of a new protector to replace him. Although there was a ready group of well trained young and "promising" Tibetan

monks who seemed to be ideal candidates for the task, the Monk found Kar (Seann

William Scott), a White young trouble-maker whose job was to show films in a seedy

movie theater, to be "the one". Kar's amazing "potential" is what convinced the Monk

to transfer his guardianship of the precious scroll to him. In the film, Kar is portrayed

as an outstandingly talented and quick learner of martial arts who acquired amazing

skill by merely imitating the moves from the Kung Fu movies he showed in the theater.

In one rooftop scene, for example, the Monk was teaching Kar the martial arts skill of

rising up (*Qing Gong*) in the air. Surprisingly, Kar was able to master this supernatural

skill within hours. His ability to accurately copy the Asian martial artists' skills shown

in movies and his supernormal speed in acquiring new martial arts techniques are

beyond ANY audience's expectation and hence could probably mislead them to think

that any human being (Whites especially), regardless of ethnicity and cultural origin, is

capable of exercising and mastering martial arts without difficulty in a short time. In

actuality the mastery of martial arts skills takes many decades to achieve. That is why

most martial arts experts tend to be elderly. Even if taking into account the necessity of

designing and setting plots to fit into the limit of show time, we are still amazed at the

White protagonists' ultra abilities of not only taking up something from "Others" but

also making it their own (Root, 1996), which inevitably assist in establishing White

superiority in a filmic form.

In *Kill Bill*, the protagonist, the Bride (Uma Thurman), is a White blonde female

assassin, who woke up from a four-year coma caused by her former boss Bill (David

Carradine), and other members of his killer band. A part of the plot shows that earlier the Bride had been sent to the mountains by Bill to learn Chinese Kung Fu from a Taoist master (Pai Mei, Gordon Liu). On Pai Mei's request, the Bride demonstrated to him what she then knew about swordsmanship, and used her Tiger Crane to battle Pai Mei's Eagle's Claw. Her initial skills presented no challenge to the kung fu master who very easily could have chopped off one of the Bride's arms. However, within a very short period of time (the film didn't illustrate the length of the time), the Bride not only acquired the strength to pierce through a thick wooden coffin lid with her bare fist when she later survived Budd's (Bill's brother, Michael Madsen) attempt to bury her alive, but she also mastered and used the Five Point Palm Exploding Heart Technique (a deadly martial art skill used to explode a person's heart after that individual takes a fifth step after being hit. Bill believed that this skill only existed in legends, but she finally used it to kill Bill as the story reached its climax.

Similarly, in *The Forbidden Kingdom*, the protagonist, Jason (called the Traveler by people in the World of Immortals), is a White boy who was obsessed with Chinese Kung Fu movies. He was charged with the mission of traveling back to ancient China through "the Gate of No-Gate" in order to return a golden staff to its "rightful owner," the Monkey King (also known as Sun Wukong, played by Jet Li) who had been petrified and kept hostage by the Jade Warlord several hundreds years before. A Kung Fu maniac as he was, Jason never possessed any martial arts skills at the beginning of the story, and he was often bullied and humiliated by Lupo (Morgan Benoit), who led a

local mob in south Boston's Chinatown.

When Jason was first transported to ancient China, he was almost killed by several Jade soldiers if it were not for the help from Lu Yan (also known as the Drunken Immortal, played by Jackie Chan). As story went on, two Kung Fu masters, Lu Yan and the Silent Monk (Jet Li), started teaching Jason Kung Fu with basics, such as Ma Bu, a skill that trains leg strength and body stability, on their way to the Five Elements Mountain to free the Monkey King. Amazingly, Jason was able to master kung fu and easily defeat Jade soldiers, and even fight with the white-haired Witch Ni Chang (played by Li Bingbing, who was the other major antagonist possessing the power second only to the Jade Warlord) and endured for some time. Moreover, when Jason was returned to the current time back in Boston, he brought back the Kung Fu he acquired in ancient China and easily handled Lupo's challenge.

In *the Last Samurai*, an American captain, Nathan Algren (Tom Cruise) went all the way from the United States to help the newly founded Japanese cabinet repress rebel samurai. During a battle, he was captured by the rebels and kept hostage in their village. Instead of escaping, Nathan Algren stayed and mastered samurai swordsmanship in six months, and was deemed by other samurai as equal to his master, Ujio (Hiroyuki Sanada), in terms of having the power and understanding of samurai culture. However, it should be noted that Ujio had spent his entire life studying and exercising samurai swordsmanship.

Whites' extraordinary capabilities of transcending cultural barriers and limits to

master Asian martial arts skills have found their ways in some other Hollywood

blockbusters. In *the Matrix*, the White protagonist Neo (Keanu Reeves) could master

various types of martial arts by merely uploading them as training programs into his

head from the main control computer. His White identity didn't stand in the way of

becoming the most talented and skillful martial artist within a very short period of time

because, according to the prophecy, he was "the One" who could defeat artificial

intelligence and save mankind. He had potential, he was unique. Also, in *the Fifth*

Element, White actress Milla Jovovich played the protagonist Leeloo who was the

purest, divine, and perfect fifth element in a female human form. Leeloo possessed the

ability to learn anything by fast-browsing pictures and videos. She mastered the martial

arts by merely browsing how Bruce Lee executed his technique in his early martial arts

films. As Nakayama & Krizek (1999) pointed out, by naturalizing Whites' supernormal

ability to take on the skills and artifacts from other culture, the plot settings in these

films facilitate weakening the existing power relation between White and the other

minority cultures, which consolidates the White centrality.

 Defeating Asian Villains and Friendliness from Other Asians. In addition to

White protagonists' ethnic transcendences and supernormal speed of mastering martial

arts skills, the necessary defeat of a vicious, seemingly omnipotent, and barely

conquerable Asian villain by the White protagonist, and the friendliness and help to the

White protagonist from one or several Asian supporting role(s) (mostly, Asian female

actresses) are also indispensable parts in the plot setting of these films. On the one hand,

the filmic portrayal of a seemingly ultra-strong Asian villain serves as a foil to the bravery, courage, and intelligence of the White heroes; on the other, the defeat of these Asian villains assists with strengthening White superiority and centrality, and sends out the information to every racial group that White identity and superiority should, under no circumstances, be challenged. The portrayals of the friendly supporting Asian roles of being subordinates to the White protagonists help, again, secure the centrality of whiteness. Asian characters' good-will and loyalty to the White protagonists are usually marked by providing them with valuable cultural artifacts, such as a unique technique or a formidable weapon.

In *Bulletproof Monk*, Kar's been granted the guardianship of the scroll by the Monk was challenged by another Tibetan monk because he doubted the appropriateness of Kar's White ethnicity for taking up such an important task. Throughout the story, this monk had been hostile to Kar and tried things to discourage him. Ironically, this monk later turned out to be a traitor in the monk group, and was killed without mercy when he was found out. This plot setting seems to be in keeping with the statement about White superiority's unchallengeable position in these films, even though this traitor monk was not killed by the White protagonist. We can easily find that this film is full of Asian characters' friendliness and willingness to provide support to the White protagonists. The Monk's consistent patience to mentor Kar, and the monk group from Tibet's willingness to assist the monk in finding his replacement are all vivid examples of showing Asian supporting roles' good intentions toward the White protagonist.

In *the Last Samurai*, Nathan Algren experienced the process of first being rejected by the samurai community as an enemy who killed their samurai heroes and widowed their women, to being included in the village and accepted into the samurai culture after he quickly came to understand the samurai spirit and mastered the exquisite samurai swordsmanship. When Algren completed his samurai sword training in six months, he incredibly, but also easily, survived the challenge by six Ninja warriors who followed and tried to kill him on his way back to the village on a cloudy, windy night. In addition to this, Algren also helped the village to defeat an assassination attempt by killing several Ninja soldiers the chancellor of the newly founded cabinet had sent to destroy them. In spite of encountering doubts based on his ethnicity in the beginning of his samurai swordsmanship training, and the defiance and hatred from the widow, Taka (Koyuki), whose husband had been killed earlier by him, Algren did not face any enduring challenges as the story went on. Ujio gave all he had to train and mentor Algren. The samurai lord Katsumoto (Ken Watanabe) also considered him to be a trustworthy friend and resourceful advice provider. Even the widow, Taka, began to fall for the killer of his husband. What is more to mention her kids' taking Algren as an ideal substitute for their father. Before the final battle, Taka gave her dead husband's samurai suit to Algren as a gift, hoping that he could help carry forward the samurai spirit. Again, Asian characters' subordination served to secure and promote White superiority in the film.

Kill Bill's White protagonist, the Bride (Uma Thurman), came to Japan to battle

the head of the underworld, an American-born Chinese named O-Ren Ishii (Lucy Liu)

as revenge for what O-Ren, together with other members of the deadly viper assassin

squad, had done in an attempt to finish her off in El Paso, Texas four years ago. Feeling

challenged by O-Ren's disrespect toward her mastering samurai sword as a "Caucasian

girl", the Bride defeated O-Ren's protecting legion – cold-blooded Gogo Yubari (Chiaki

Kuriyama) and the Crazy 88 - in a restaurant, and cut off part of O-Ren's head with the

samurai sword in the backyard of the restaurant on a cold snowy winter night. Pai

Mei's being killed by Elle Driver (one member of the assassin squad, played by Daryl

Hannah) with a poisoned fish head, as a revenge to her eyes being snatched out by Pai

Mei earlier, further illustrated that the consequence of challenging whiteness by Asian

figures would definitely be unfavorable. Behind the Bride, we find two Asian figures

who helped provide her with weapons and techniques to achieve her ultimate revenge.

Hattori Hanzo (Sonny Chiba), the best samurai sword maker who had retired for 30

years, agreed without much hesitation to make the Bride a brand new sword that best

fitted her purpose. Pai Mei, who was not in favor of the Bride in the first place, taught

her the one-inch punch skill, and the five point palm exploding heart technique that

many had speculated as a mythical technique.

The defeat of the Jade Warlord by Jason (Michael Angarano) with the help of

Lu Yan (Jackie Chan), the silent monk (Jet Li), and Sparrow (Liu Yifei)'s jade hairpin

in *The Forbidden Kingdom* is also a good example of centralizing the unchallengeable

whiteness. Despite being merely capable of fantasizing about fanciful names of several

Kung Fu styles at the beginning, Jason was trained by two top-notch Kung Fu masters with patience and perseverance. Similarly, in *The Mummy: Tomb of Dragon Emperor*, the O'Connell family received generous help and guidance on their way to prevent the resurrection of the Emperor (Jet Li) and finally defeat him. The Emperor's tomb watcher Lin (Isabella Leong) and her witch mother, Zi Yuan (who put the spell on the emperor, played by Michelle Yeoh) even helped save Rick O'Connell's (Brendan Fraser) life after he was injured by the Emperor's sword when he took the sword for his son Alex (Luke Ford). With a tip for piercing through the heart, and the special sword given by Zi Yuan and Lin, Rick and Alex managed to kill the seemingly invincible Emperor before his awakened arm crossed the Great Wall to gain immortality. As the price of helping Rick and Alex, Zi Yuan and Lin sacrificed their immortality and even Zi Yuan's life. The plot setting regarding the defeat of evil Asians and other Asian characters' subordination in these two films vivifies the centrality of whiteness.

It is necessary to mention another film, *Lethal Weapon VI*, in which Jet Li played the role of Wah Sing Ku (head of the Triads in LA Chinatown) who committed all kinds of atrocities (murdering, human smuggling, currency counterfeiting, etc.). The climax scene is set on a rainy night filled with lightning and thunder. Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson) and Roger Murtaugh (Danny Glover) rushed to a meeting between Ku and a corrupted Chinese general in a warehouse at the city port where Ku intended to make a trade of four secretly extradited criminals from China called "the four fathers" with the general by using counterfeit money. One of "the four fathers" was Ku's brother.

However, Riggs and Murtaugh's untimely show-up gave Ku away to the general. After fierce gunfire exchange, the general and three of "the four fathers" (excluding Ku's brother) were killed. When Murtaugh tried to shoot Ku, the bullet hit Ku's brother in his heart instead. With great despair and anger at losing his sibling, Ku was determined to kill both Riggs and Murtaugh with his skillful martial arts. We couldn't even think of the fight as a contest as Riggs and Murtaugh were only two American cops good at shooting with guns and unable to perform any martial arts. However, in spite of being beaten up badly, Riggs and Murtaugh miraculously managed to kill the furious Asian martial arts master with the help of a metal staff and several rifle bullets. The story setting was immediately changed from a stormy raining night to a bright sunny day for the happy ending when Riggs became a father, and Murtaugh became a grandfather.

Also in *Lethal Weapon VI*, in the process of taking down Ku and his Triads, Riggs and Murtaugh get much help from the roles played by other Asians. For example, in one scene, Ku and his gangs rushed into Murtaugh's home to ambush him and Riggs, and he almost successfully burned all of them alive. But Ping, a Chinese kid Murtaugh had saved together with his whole family, came out of nowhere with a knife in his hand to cut loose the ropes tying Riggs and Murtaugh's hands so that every one was saved. Other than this, Hong (Ping's grandfather) has been particularly friendly and grateful to Murtaugh and Riggs throughout the plot setting.

The plot setting of defeating Asia villains by the White protagonist as necessary is also popular in some other Hollywood major releases. For example, in *Live Free or*

Die Hard, one of the major criminals, a very tough Chinese female Kung Fu master

named Mai Lihn (Maggie Q) was killed by the White protagonist cop, John McClane

(Bruce Willis) before she was able to destroy an important power plant. The defeat of

Asian villains and other Asians' being pictured as friendly supporters to the White

protagonist are "the primary operation of the process of appropriation" (Root, 1996,

p.160), which the dominant culture use to assimilate the different minority culture

(described euphemistically as "melting pot") so as to make the once mysterious

Oriental power less dangerous than it used to be. We have analyzed and discussed how

whiteness is strategically communicated in several Hollywood films featuring martial

arts regarding their storylines and plot settings. In order to achieve a more convincing

and more thorough analysis, the following sections will be devoted to dialogues and

characterizations in these films.

Dialogue Analysis

Justifying Whiteness by Asians. In addition to plots, dialogues between White

protagonist(s) and Asian supporting roles/Asian villain(s) employed in each film under

analysis can often help us more explicitly identify some cultural appropriation by

whiteness. The focus of this section will be on the dialogue pertaining to the major

storylines that directly or indirectly express White superiority. The most distinctive

strategy for communicating whiteness in the films under analysis is using the words

from an Asian figure to justify the White protagonist's supraethnic mastery of Asian

martial art skills. In *Bulletproof Monk*, when Kar's ethnicity was raised as a negative

factor possibly affecting his viability for replacing the Monk to protect the scroll, the

Monk endorsed Kar's viability by saying, "prophecies must apply to everyone or they

mean nothing." This statement from a non-White is obviously a rhetoric strategy to

counteract any concerns and doubts against Whites' validity for assuming a

traditionally non-White duty, and hence established and defended Kar's unquestionable

viability.

Similarly in *the Last Samurai*, when Taka was talking with her brother

Katsumoto about having Algren leave her house because of "the unbearable shame"

Algren had brought upon her and her family for killing her husband in a earlier battle,

Katsumoto refused her quest by saying, "There must be some reason why he's here

with us…It's God's will." By being referred to as "God's will," the White protagonist's

ethnicity is rendered a sainthood, untouchable, and even "God-sent". In another scene,

after Algren had made progress in his swordsmanship skill by drawing with Ujio in

their training, Katsumoto praised Algren, "Your skill is improving." Algren answered,

"I am a beginner." And Katsumoto sighed, "Such modesty is very Japanese…" At this

point, Algren's White identity is covered by his well-formed "Japanese modesty," and

he is completely accepted by the samurai culture, about which he used to "not give a

damn" at the beginning of the story.

In *Kill Bill*, when the Bride was sent to learn Kung Fu from Pai Mei, she was

told by Bill to obey whatever this half-almighty-God, half-fearful-devil Kung Fu

master wanted her to do because "He (Pai Mei) hates Caucasians, despises Americans,

and has nothing but contempt for women…" This proved to be true when Pai Mei

expressed his stereotypical viewpoint about women, especially Caucasian women, by

saying "Like all Yankee women, the only thing you know how to do is order in

restaurants and spend a man's money." However, as the story went on, we didn't hear

any such comments any more, as the Bride showed her obedience, diligence, and

toughness in her Kung Fu training. Pai Mei seemed to have accepted this Caucasian

woman he used to despise as his favorite student by passing the mysterious deadliest

blow in all of the martial arts – the five point palm exploding heart technique – to the

Bride. Pai Mei's acceptance of the Bride as his student regardless of her White ethnicity

is surprising, because it has been an unwritten tradition in most Chinese martial art

culture to most people that the selection of an inheritor of a martial art skill is more

than harsh, as some martial arts can only be passed to male successors (Henning, 1981;

West, 2006). Again, Whites' supraethnic viability is justified in a filmic form.

It is also the case in *The Forbidden Kingdom* when the Silent Monk questioned

Jason's ethnicity as the staff deliverer by saying "He is not even from here (the land of

China)." But Lu Yan came out and helped justify by saying, "Monk, all living beings

have equal chances according to Buddha, don't they? Merciful Buddha!" Here, even

Buddha's comments are introduced to help establish Whites' supraethnic viability for

completing a Chinese mission. And later when Lu Yan and the Silent Monk gave Jason

Kung Fu training, Lu Yan told Jason that "Kung Fu – hard work over time to

accomplish skill – (is) formless, nameless. The true master dwells within, only you can

free him." It is implied that the White protagonist has got the potential to leapfrog and become a Kung Fu master. The justification for White superiority is once again from an important Asian role in this film.

Supraethnic Mastery & Defeating Asians. Compared to Asian roles' verbal justification for White protagonists' supraethnic viability, the defeat of Asian figures who defy Whites is worth our attention in analyzing dialogues in these films as well. O-Ren paid a price for saying "Silly Caucasian girl likes to play with Samurai swords" before she started the one-on-one duel with the Bride as her statement clearly cast doubt on the compatibility between the Bride's White ethnicity and the samurai sword's Asian identity. By claiming in Japanese that "For mocking you earlier, I apologize," O-Ren was obviously stunned by and realized the Bride's proficiency "in the exquisite art of the samurai sword." However, it seemed too late. O-Ren fell to the Bride's sword very soon. O-Ren's Japanese apology served as a typical approval of the White practitioner's superiority and ultra ability in grappling with skills and techniques that were once regarded as Asian-only.

Also in *Kill Bill*, when Elle, another White female assassin, was sent to train with Pai Mei, she was punished for cursing Pai Mei as "a miserable old fool" because she couldn't stand Pai Mei's arrogance and toughness. Pai Mei snatched out her right eye. However, Elle got her revenge by poisoning the fish head in Pai Mei's dinner. Before Pai Mei died, he cursed, "Elle, you treacherous dog, I give you my word…" After Pai Mei said this Elle stepped on Pai Mei's chest, and replied, "To me, the word

of a miserable old fool like you, is worth less than nothing!" The legendary

half-almighty-God, half-fearful-devil Pai Mei was killed by Elle very easily. The death

of the Japanese underworld guy, O-Ren, and Pai Mei revealed to us the dangers of

questioning White's ethnicity and defying White superiority, which further facilitated

the establishment of White centrality and the appropriation of Asian ethnicity and

culture in these Hollywood films.

In addition to the above analysis of the dialogues in these films, there are still

some typical conversations that could be related to whiteness themes. For example,

Bulletproof Monk's White protagonist told the Monk that he had got himself a

Cantonese name. But when he pronounced it, the Monk found that his pronunciation

was incorrect and tried to correct him. Feeling that he would lose face, Kar didn't listen

to him at all, claiming "it is my name and I can pronounce it any way I want." In a

scene of *the Last Samurai*, when Algren was drunk and asked for a Japanese servant to

get him something to drink, he screamed at him by saying, "Speak English you little

yellow turd! Stop bowing and find me something to drink! Chop-chop!!!" In a later

scene, when stopped by a guard outside the house in which Katsumoto was kept

prisoner, without invitation, Graham (Algren's interpreter at the beginning of the story),

along with Algren tried to take Katsumoto's picture and persuade him to escape,

insulted the peasant verbally by saying "You insolent, useless son of a peasant dog!

How dare you show your sword in his presence! Do you know this is …" he pointed to

Algren and continued, "This is the President of the United States of America! He is

here to lead our armies in victorious battle against the rebels …" All of these are vivid

portrayals of Whites' being more superior during their encounter with Asians.

Also in *the Last Samurai* when Algren was captured and taken back to their

village as a hostage, he was deemed by Ujio as "insolent swine", but because of

Algren's outstanding progress during his swordsmanship training with Ujio later, he

was treated with respect by Ujio, and even the other samurai warriors in the village. In

the scene before the final battle, Taka asked Algren to wear the armor of Hirotaro, her

husband who had been killed by Algren. She told Algren "if you wear this, it will honor

us." Other than this, as a gift Katsumoto gave Algren a beautiful samurai sword with

some Japanese characters carved on it. Katsumoto translated these Japanese characters

to Algren as "I belong to the warrior in whom the old ways have joined the new",

indicating that Algren is a new kind of samurai warrior. From enemy to friends, from

the "unbearable shame" to "family honor", from a clumsy layman to a really handy

samurai warrior; everything seems justifiable and natural for a White guy who never

had related to things Asian. The White person's possessing skills and techniques, and

achieving recognition from Asian culture demonstrate to us a culturally imperial

attitude that facilitates the reinforcement of whiteness hegemony by "producing the

East discursively as the West's inferior Other, a maneuver which strengthens—indeed,

even partially constructs—the West's self-image as a superior civilization"

(Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p. 39).

Characterizations Analysis

In this section, the analysis will be focused on the characterizations of White

protagonists, Asian villains, and other Asian supporting roles to further explore how

White superiority is strategically deployed in the casting of these films to appropriate

Asianness. To assist us with understanding how whiteness is communicated in the films

under analysis in terms of their cast setting, characterizations of White

protagonist(s)/hero(es) in each film will be described, and compared with those of

Asian protagonist(s)/hero(es) represented in earlier martial arts films.

Characters in Samples. In *the Last Samurai*, the protagonist is Nathan Algren

played by Tom Cruise. At the beginning, this character was portrayed as a half-retired

American Civil War veteran who was obviously in a dreadful condition because of the

traumatic war experience. He was always drunk, otherwise he could not fall asleep.

With an opportunity of going to Japan to train the newly established modernized army

to repress the ongoing samurai riot, Algren got to know the samurai culture after being

captured and kept hostage in the samurai village for several months and became deeply

attracted by its essence: honor and loyalty. Very soon, Algren was accepted by the

community and started practicing Samurai Katana Sword (samurai sword skills). He

seemed to be affected deeply and changed completely from head to toe. He no longer

had trouble falling asleep. He felt peaceful inside. He seemed to have found where he

really belonged. In the end, Algren was the last samurai, and the only samurai left to

pass on the samurai spirit and stories to other. In this film, the White protagonist is

portrayed as a combination of brave and noble hero to accord with the samurai spirit.

The biggest antagonist in *the Last Samurai* is the personal advisor of the Emperor, Omura (Masato Harada). Omura was depicted as a politician who resorted to every conceivable means to import westernization and industrialization into Japan. He took advantage of the youth of the Emperor to maximize his own profits, and got rid of every one who dared to stand in his way. Japanese as he was, he showed little mercy to his Samurai compatriots. As opposed to the White protagonist Algren's kindliness, honesty, and integrity, the Asian role Omura's personality could be described as deceitful, insidious, and ruthless. At the end of the film, Omura lost the Emperor's trust and the Americans' business because of Algren's showing up to tell the Emperor about the stories of all the dead Samurai warriors. Justice seemed to be restored.

The other major Asian roles in *the Last Samurai* were unanimously supportive and friendly to the White protagonist. Although having experienced some hostility at the beginning (apparently because he killed one of the samurai warriors, Hirotaro, Taka's husband), Algren was quickly accepted and respected by the samurai culture and the community. The samurai leader Katsumoto became Algren's samurai spirit mentor, another skillful samurai Ujio became Algren's samurai sword teacher, and both of them were very patient and felt "honored" to have such a foreigner to share their culture. Hirotaro's (the samurai Algren killed during their combat) family (his wife Taka and his two sons) also swiftly changed their resentful attitude and hostility toward Algren, and even respected and treated him like a husband and father. Algren's White hero figure,

Omura's devilish portrayal, and other major Asian characters' friendliness and kindliness in *the Last Samurai* are all typical representations of strategically deployed White superiority.

The White protagonist Kar in *Bulletproof Monk* was played by Seann William Scott, who was portrayed as a problematic offbeat at the beginning part of the film. His job was to show Kung Fu films in a rundown movie theater, and his part-time avocation was mostly picking pockets in the street. Troubled with some "minor flaws", Kar was still chosen by the Monk (Chow Yun-Fat) to be the new protect of the powerful secret scroll because he could sense the goodness in Kar. Righteousness, courage, intelligence (a bit streetwise, of course) and extraordinary talent added to Kar's qualifications for shouldering such great responsibility. Kar was actually depicted as the mixture of brave and savior hero in this film. On the other side, the Monk was characterized as the kind, upright, and mysterious Kung Fu master, who sometimes were easily tricked by Kar. In this film, there wasn't a major Asian antagonist except a Tibetan monk who doubted Kar's ethnicity for becoming the new scroll protector and showed his hostility toward him until he was found out to be a traitor in the monk group and put to justice later in the film. Kar's being chosen as "the One" in spite of his slightly disturbing past, the punishment of this Tibetan monk, and the help and mentorship offered to Kar by the Monk also helped reveal the implicit centralization of whiteness in this film.

In the revenge story of *Kill Bill*, the White protagonist is a female assassin (the Bride) played by Uma Thurman. The Bride, a.k.a., the Black Mamba, was a former

member of an elite group of assassins called the "Deadly Viper Assassination Squad". A formidable, ruthless assassin as she was, the Bride also possessed such qualities as honesty, loyalty, determination, and commitment. The Bride is depicted as affectionate as well. However, she never confused right with wrong. She stuck to the principle that if she got attacked, she would counteract with no remorse. Therefore, the role of the Bride is actually a fearless-warrior type of hero.

In *Kill Bill*, there are three major Asian roles, O-Ren Ishii, Hattori Hanzo, and Pai Mei. O-Ren Ishii was another one of the other assassins on the "Viper Squad." She was portrayed as ambitious and ruthless Asian villain who was in total command of the Japanese underworld. Affected by her childhood experiences, O-Ren developed an independent but also over-controlling type of personality which disallowed doubts and challenges of any kind toward her non-Japanese ethnicity. The scene in which she chopped off the head of the guy who questioned her gender and ethnicity for ruling such a big business was an exact footnote. However, her defiance toward the "silly Caucasian girl" was suppressed by the Bride's "more than proficient Samurai sword skill."

The other two Asian figures in the film all served as helping roles for the Bride. Hattori Hanzo, a retired Japanese Samurai sword maker, used to be Bill's teacher and made the finest Samurai swords in the world. He was portrayed as extremely friendly and helpful to the Bride. He easily gave up his 30-year retirement just to assist the Bride with completing her mission when he was asked to give a sword for free as his

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sword was not "for sale." Pai Mei who taught the Bride Kung Fu was characterized as an old, mysterious, arrogant, and extremely tough martial arts master. He didn't like Caucasians, and particularly despised Caucasian women as, according to Pai Mei, the only thing they "know how to do is order in restaurants and spend a man's money." Despite his dislike toward "Yankee women", Pai Mei still accepted the Bride and taught her everything, including the "Five Point Palm Exploding Heart Technique," a technique Pai Mei refused to teach anybody else, including Bill. To our surprise, Pai Mei was killed by Elle Driver, another member on the "Viper Squad." Pai Mei snatched out Elle's right eye because she cursed him disrespectfully. As a payback, Elle poisoned Pai Mei's dinner. The killing of ruthless O-Ren's and arrogant and tough Pai Mei, and Hanzo's friendliness and helpfulness, all of the characterizations of these roles portrayed in this film helps defend the unquestionable superiority of Whites' ethnicity.

The characterizations of the White protagonists, the Asian antagonists, and other supporting Asian roles follow the similar patterns in *The Forbidden Kingdom* and *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor*. Jason (the protagonist in *The Forbidden Kingdom*), Rick O'Connell and Alex O'Connell (the protagonists in *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor*) were all portrayed as fearless and courageous heroes. In addition to their common bravery, these protagonists also had some uniqueness: Jason was very upright, compassionate, and diligent; Rick O'Connell was humorous and righteous; Alex O'Connell was also upright, and very charming (playboy-like). The two major Asian villains in both films have a lot in common: extraordinary martial art skills,

seemingly undefeatable dark power and strength, and above all, highly deceitful, insidious, and vicious personalities. Unlike most Asian villains in earlier martial arts films who were put to justice by the Asian protagonists in the end, the Asian villains in recent Hollywood martial arts films are becoming more powerful, look more invincible, and more heartless and brutal. The Jade Warlord (the major villain in *The Forbidden Kingdom*) took advantage of the absence of the Jade Emperor to imprison the Monkey King, and killed at will (including his own soldiers) to keep the Golden Staff from returning to the Monkey King. He even claimed that "martial art is based on deceit" as long as you could win. In order to be immortal, the Dragon Emperor (the major villain in *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor*) could stab his best sorceress who had just chanted incantations for his immortality, and kill his most trustworthy general. He was so brutal and unmerciful that he buried his enemies alive under the Great Wall he built to fence off intruders. He even had the ability to control the Five Elements: Gold, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth.

The supporting Asian roles (Lu Yan, the Silent Monk in *The Forbidden Kingdom*; the sorceress, Zi Yuan and her daughter, Lin in *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor*) in both films share many commonalities as well. They were exceptionally patient and willing to answer questions and solve problems for the White protagonists whenever possible. They were more skillful in martial arts than the White protagonists so that they could be a guardian/protector in case danger happened to them. They all carried the duties of providing indirect but necessary help to the White

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protagonists to kill the villains as the climatic ending. Last but not least, all of these

supporting characters were willing and ready to sacrifice their own lives to facilitate the

White protagonists achieving their goals. It is obvious that the Asian villains' cruel and

merciless nature and the Asian supporting roles' willingness for full support without

asking for repayment further centralize Whites' superiority.

Comparison of Characters. According to Teo (1999), the Asian protagonists'

(e.g., Bruce Lee in *Enter the Dragon*, Jackie Chan in *Master of Drunken Fist*, even Jet

Li in *Fearless*) fighting White antagonists in different earlier martial arts movies were

more of pro-Chinese/Asian type of films rather than anti-White. But if we compare the

characterizations of the White protagonists in the films under analysis with that of the

Asian protagonists in some earlier Hollywood martial arts films, we may be able to find

differences that are substantial for further revealing the White centrality prevalent in

today's Hollywood productions featuring Asian martial arts by downgrading Asians in

an attempt to centralize White superiority in those films.

As was mentioned in previous chapters, Asian male martial art heroes in

Hollywood martial arts movies used to be portrayed as sexually active hero (e.g., Bruce

Lee, who had been displaying a unique type of Chinese masculinity by acting as

fearless warriors, such as *Fist of Fury*, *Enter the Dragon*, *Game of Death*), as sexless

passive hero (e.g., Charlie Chan, who represents both Yellow Face and the Asian

Passive Hero, decorated with "Confucian wisdom" [Isaacs, 1980, p.119]), or as sexless

active hero (e.g., Jackie Chan, and Jet Li, whose roles were always heroes without

romantic affairs with female in the movies, such as *Kiss of the Dragon*, *The One*, *Unleashed*, *the Medallion*, *Rush Hour* series, *Shanghai Knights*, *The Tuxedo*, etc.). Almost all the characters played by these Asian actors were rigidly restrained to righteous fearless warriors or action heroes. Nonetheless, the characterizations of the White protagonists in the films under analysis seem to be more colorful and more humanly "flesh". In addition to their bravery and integrity, the White protagonists have individualities unique enough for audiences to identify with. For example, Kar in *Bulletproof Monk* doesn't have a decent job; he accidently picks a cop's pocket but could get away by trapping the cop. Alex O'Connell in *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* could have a charming playboy side other than tomb-exploring; he could fall in love with the Chinese girl Lin and kiss her at the end of film. Algren in the Last Samurai could show romantic interest in the wife of the samurai he killed and show his feelings for her. Jason in *The Forbidden Kingdom* could bring the girl named Sparrow back to this life and continue their romance. The Bride in *Kill Bill* could show her fragility while being a superwoman. The White heroes portrayed in today's Hollywood films are not flawless, but credible. Comparatively, they are more real and close to the people in actual lives, in spite of their extraordinary talents, potentials, and super powers.

According to Cho, et al. (1999), one of the reasons for Asians' unidimensional characterizations is more or less due to Americans' attitudes toward early Asian immigrants, and to American media's wrongfully stereotypical representation of Asian

images throughout American media history. The characterizations of White

protagonists portrayed in today's Hollywood martial arts films are of critical

importance because fictional characters and stories in films "inevitably bring into play

real-life assumptions not only about space and time but also about social and cultural

relationships" (Shohat & Stam, 2000, p. 146) and can possibly exert influences in our

real world to cause serious consequences beyond what we can imagine or expect. All

audience from either White or non-White racial groups can be affected.

Summary of the Findings

In this chapter, five recent Hollywood major releases (*The Last Samurai*, *Kill

Bill*, *Bulletproof Monk*, *The Forbidden Kingdom*, and *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon

Emperor*) featuring Asian martial arts were analyzed regarding their major storylines,

dialogues between major characters, and characterizations of the White protagonists,

the Asian antagonists, and other Asian supporting roles to expose the strategically

deployed White superiority in them. Through analysis, we see the common factors that

are indispensable for securing White centrality and strategically promoting White

superiority through these films: (a) the unquestionable position of White protagonists'

ethnicity backed up by Asian figures in intercultural activities; (b) White protagonists'

supernormal speed of mastering exquisite and highly skillful Asian martial art

techniques; (c) the necessary defeat of a vicious, seemingly omnipotent, and barely

conquerable Asian villain by the White protagonist; (d) the friendliness and support

toward the White protagonist from one or several Asian supporting role(s) (mostly,

Asian female actresses); and (e) restricting Asian roles to a narrow range (either villains or assistants, exceptionally good at martial arts). They served well as the strategic basis of subconsciously (if not intentionally) sending messages pertaining to emphasizing whiteness and appropriating Asian culture to a global audience.

The Whites' dominance about intercultural interactions like their ultra speed and unbelievable talents in the acquisition of martial arts skills, and the Asian figures' submissiveness and subordination were likely to convince the audience that since Asian martial arts skill is portrayed in these films as "universal" and belonging to all human beings, it will be ridiculous if a non-Asian people cannot learn, practice, and master them. It should also be regarded as reasonable for Asians to accept this cultural appropriation because Whites' actions and attitudes have been naturalized as "human." There are certainly no reasons why Asians should question and be unhappy about a human's natural deeds. Because film is a globally distributed form of mass communication media, the whiteness themes, and the strategies used to naturalize and rationalize them, could have a broader impact than individuals' rhetoric of whiteness. Beyond that, the cultural appropriation by White protagonists in films of this type communicates to the White audience with filmic reinforcement of uncompromised and intentional assumptions of whiteness to be privileged compared with the other racial groups.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSIONS

<u>Implication of the Present Study</u>

Captain Algren in *the Last Samurai* chose to abandon his own "modern and civilized" culture and became the last samurai to hold on to an Asian culture that was to be eradicated by Westernization, which was represented by Whites like Algren, because he could regain mental serenity and complete his redemption. However, the storyline of the Last Samurai was trying all it could to project a conscientious, Asian-friendly, "good" White person who was totally unlike the other money-driven Whites. Originally captured and imprisoned as an enemy by the rebel samurai, Algren was later entirely accepted by the once deemed "barbaric" samurai community, and entitled as the last true warrior, the last samurai at the end of the film. Yet, if we pay closer attention, it is obvious that Algren was not brutally shot to death like the other samurai just because of his White identity. There is no way that a White person can be executed by the weapons made by Whites. White audiences may overlook or accept without questioning the credibility of these intercultural contradictions, and hence identify with the White protagonists so as to further project their image onto themselves by extension (Huhndorf, 2001). The filmic stories of White protagonists transcending ethnic and cultural barriers could create a fictional reality to mislead viewers from historic and actual events.

During an interview back in 2004, Jackie Chan (n.d.) complained: "It's all the

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same, cop from Hong Kong, cop from China. Jet Li, Chow-Yun Fat and I all face the same problem: our roles are limited...I don't want to be seen as an action hero anymore" (2004). Asian roles' refinement to either villains to be ultimately defeated or destroyed, or friends to provide generous or even self-sacrificing assistance (both are martial art experts) helps "amplify, reify, or validate" (Tierney, 2006, p.618) the roles of the White protagonists, which indicates a colonialist mindset that "the colonial subject functions only to consolidate the self of the colonizer" (Young, 1990, p. 162). But White audiences will possibly be unaware of this appropriation of Asianness in the films because "White discourse implacably reduces the non-White subject to being a function of the White subject, not allowing him/her space or autonomy, permitting neither the recognition of similarities nor acceptance of differences except as a means of knowing the White self" (Dyer, 1997, p. 13).

In addition to the narrow and restrained range for portraying Asian characters in American martial arts films, a critical gender issue also emerges. Asian female actresses in American films are portrayed as sexually conquerable images that are submissive to Caucasian protagonists. The spark of romance could almost always be ignited in films featuring a White male protagonist and an Asian female in supporting role (e.g., Algren and Taka in *the Last Samurai*, Jason and Golden Sparrow in *The Forbidden Kingdom*, Alex O'Connell and Lin in *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor*). Even if the female figures are martial art experts, they are portrayed as exotic, soft, and submissive figures in front of the White male protagonist (Sun, 2003).

Nevertheless, this is not the case with films featuring an Asian male protagonist and a White female supporting character (e.g., films such as Jackie Chan's *The Medallion* and *The Tuxedo*, Jet Li's *Unleashed* and *Kiss of the Dragon*). On the one hand, this reflects a gender stereotype that women should be portrayed as sweet, soft, and submissive to cater to the masculinity needs of men (which is not focused on in current study); on the other, the portrayals of both Asian men and women are clearly categorized in Hollywood films, which assists with creating and perpetuating stereotypical images of all Asian women and men. The filmmakers put these non-White images in the movies, and the audiences passively learn from these movies, and tend to develop their standards for what people from non-White groups (Blacks, Asians, Indians, Mexicans, etc.) should be like in a movie featuring these non-White themes. After that they will have this kind of expectation, and when it comes to movie makers making new movies featuring these themes, they try to cater to this kind of taste (Bernardi, 2008). This is how commercialized, racially and culturally biased Hollywood movies are made and publicized worldwide. Ironically, although many film critics have been mentioning that "with its martial-arts magic and Chinese stars, this film's (*The Forbidden Kingdom*) aim is to bring Chinese culture to Hollywood" (Louisa Lim, 2007, para.17) when publicizing Hollywood martial arts films, the actual effects remain questionable with the existing cultural appropriation by the dominance whiteness in the American society.

By strategically constructing the reality in which martial arts belong to the

world and all human beings, whiteness ideology validate Whites' supernormal speed

and extraordinary talent in mastering this cultural artifact, clearly labeled "Asian." If

we turn to cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1973; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli,

1994) again, it is obvious that research has indicated that the more we are exposed to

the messages from mass media (TV and film) the more we are likely to believe in the

world portrayed in the media and the message delivered by them to be real and true.

The reality created in these martial arts films clearly deliver the message of White

superiority and centrality to the audience. Therefore, we have seen that numerous

White actors/actresses have been made from sheer laymen to skillful martial art

practitioners to save the world. Whites' supraethnic talents and supernormal speed in

acquiring martial art skill echoes what Said (1994) calls a ''flexible positional

superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with

the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand'' (p. 7).

Interestingly enough, we rarely see American filmmakers portray an Asian

figure who turned quickly from layman into expert in skills and practices the Whites

are good at (e.g., a football player, a basketball player, a hockey player, a cowboy, an

English teacher, etc.) as films featuring such stories may be deemed less credible or

impossible. Such fictions cross the boundaries and intrude in areas that are exclusively

marked White. Stories of such kind are not imaginable to White audience and likely to

be regarded as anti-Whites', against commonsense and contrary to social norms. Since,

according to Tierney (2006), "the White audience's intercultural film tastes run not

toward the relativization of their own culture but the repeated display of their own, and

their own culture's superiority, both implicit and explicit" (p.621), the cultural

appropriation of Asian culture in martial arts films made in White audience's backyard

– Hollywood – is expectedly obvious. Facing with such a deep rooted system to favor

White privilege and dominance in the American society, minority groups can hardly do

anything to challenge the ever-existing status quo.

Limitations and Suggestions for Prospective Future Studies

By critically analyzing the plots, dialogues, and characterizations designed and

employed in five Hollywood major releases featuring Asian martial arts through the

strategic rhetoric of whiteness, the present study explored and demonstrated how

martial arts, as an Asian cultural artifact, is appropriated by Whites in movies, and how

these cultural appropriations communicate images of White American culture and the

culture of ethnic minorities. One of the probable limitations of this study is that a more

thorough analysis of samples other than the present ones could make the results

stronger. Another limitation is, because of the critical nature of the theoretical

framework, it might be difficult to achieve a balance between objectivity and

subjectivity for the analysis. The last possible limitation is, if another method (e.g.,

questionnaires for film viewers) was used as a supplement for data collection and

analysis, we might obtain different perceptions and a more comprehensive result.

Behind the modern racism featuring White superiority prevalent in the United

States, and also in the West, is what Shohat and Stam (1994) call Eurocentrism: "the

procrustean forcing of cultural heterogeneity into a single paradigmatic perspective in which Europe is seen as the unique source of meaning, as the world's center of gravity, as ontological 'reality' to the rest of the world's shadow" (p.1). They further illustrate that "as an ideological substratum common to colonialist, imperialist, and racist discourse, Eurocentrism is a form of vestigial thinking which permeates and structures contemporary practices and representations even after the formal end of colonialism"(p.2). Based on this statement, Bernardi (1996) concludes that U.S. film, arguably as "the most popular and profitable form of culture in the last one hundred years, has consistently constructed whiteness, the representational and narrative form of Eurocentrism, as the norm by which all 'Others' fail by comparison"(p.5). As a complement to Bernardi's conclusion, the present study has demonstrated how the appropriation of "Others'" culture in American films is obtained to secure and promote White superiority and to perpetuate the inferiority of "Others" in this postcolonial era.

Future researchers working in this area should take a further look at why supraethnic cultural appropriations by a White person are so frequently communicated to audience by American filmmakers, why Hollywood films are still popular worldwide considering it is so obvious that the portrayals of non-White people and culture are sometimes inaccurate or even discriminatory, and for what reasons the stereotypical and restricted/underrepresented portrayals of Asian men and women in American films have persisted until now. These questions might be better answered and understood if an interdisciplinary study in different communication areas is conducted.

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