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## BRUCE LEE'S ROLE IN BREAKING STEREOTYPICAL VIEW OF CHINESE/ASIAN MEN IN FILMS AND ASAN ANTI-RACIST MODEL

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**ABSTRACT** -Bruce Lee, the legendary martial artist listed as one of the 100 influential men of 20<sup>th</sup> century , who was also an actor, philosopher, director and screenwriter gained popular recognition both for his style of unarmed combat as an exponent of Chinese martial arts as well as an actor for his acting skills, grimaces and fighting styles through his films both in Hollywood and Asian films. He was the one who contributed to the surging interest of martial arts and never- seen- before armless action scenes among the audience. But besides popularising martial arts in films , he through his action films , threw a challenge to the long-running racist stereotyped presentation of asians to the audience of the West including that of Hollywood. This paper will try to explore in brief the history of asian(esp. Chinese) stereotyping in films and how Bruce Lee's advent in films broke this barrier of typecasting .

**Index Terms** :Bruce Lee, Martial Arts (films), Asian Stereotyping ,Chinese-Asian Stereotyping,Western Media, Western media, Hollywood, anti-chinese Racism

### I. INTRODUCTION

#### METHODOLOGY

For this paper , purposive sampling from films, TV series , articles as qualitative research has been held. Data has been collected regarding the history of asian stereotyping in Hollywood from the internet and article content. For data analysis, some Martial Arts films have been chosen where Bruce Lee is the protagonist, such as – *Fist of Fury*, *Enter the Dragon* and *The Way of the Dragon*.

#### Secondary Data Collection

Secondary data has been collected from biopics of Bruce Lee beside TV series like- *The Green Hornet*, *The Legend of Bruce Lee*.

The data collected from these sources will fulfill the objective of the research to examine the title topic. Also, data has been gathered from english films featuring Asian-American leads for additional information.

## II. Historical Background of Stereotyping and Bruce Lee's entry

Hollywood, the metonymous name for the cinema or film industry of the United States, has a complex history of representation of the Asian esp. Chinese people which can be traced back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Chinese workers were 'brought to the US to work on the 'transcontinental railroad' ; after the completion of which an anti-chinese sentimental wave flooded the nation. This happened just for the reason that Americans thought that those Chinese people who were immigrants no longer needed to stay anymore.

An anti-oriental bias oriented attitude which was there among the people of the West played a role here which was adopted by the visual media too.

Visual media was also used to exploit prejudice for the sake of this antipathy. 'Following the rise of Hollywood' , an over-totalizing of Asians took place in films. In the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the years 1960-61 were witness to the Asian stereotyping both for men and women in english films. Asian males were symbolized as characters showing oriental features condemnable to the West like -speaking grammatically or syntactically wrong english, making self-ridiculing comments, unappealing to English-speaking side-characters. Beside Asian esp. Chinese women were portrayed in a stigmatic way as temptresses yet disposable for untrustworthiness. In the movie *Sixteen Candles* , we see the Asian student character named Long Duk Dong speaking ridiculously wrong english in an attempt to praise the dinner.

Long Duk Dong: "Very clever dinner. Appetising food fitting neatly into interesting round Pie."

So, basically it can be said that Hollywood had a cinematic racism, which portrayed or preferred to depict Asians, people of the East having or showing such forms of expression which make them least suitable for any lead character at least in any Hollywood film or perhaps Hollywood didn't want them to give any such role and so casted Asians as characters with demerits rather than as figures who are upholders of their revered oriental customs or mannerism or tradition along with nepotism for western actors. Before the 1970s , 'western perception of China' was Mao Zedong and 'communism and cheap consumer products'. 'Chinese culture was as remote as any could be, impossibly exotic and seemingly impenetrable'. As Hollywood was displaying Eastern people in such way, it must have had effect in some way or the other for developing biased attitude of the West toward East ,which got projection in films. 'Then came Bruce Lee – the very first Asian superstar' to break the bias. He ended the bias which we can call continental anti-asian racism in entertainment media. Bruce Lee ended anti-asian stereotyping in films by his spectacular martial arts moves or skill with unprecedented, unmatched speed and a projection of magnificent, ideal and iconic fatless physique combined with it. He became the representative of Before Bruce Lee came, Asian men were largely portrayed in western films as docile servants, subservient, emasculated unskilled labourers or evil geniuses patterned after Dr. Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan. Dr. Fu Manchu is a supervillain who was introduced in a series of novels by the English author Sax Rohmer , who has become an archetype of the evil criminal genius. Charley Chan is a fictional Honolulu police detective created by author Earl Derr Biggers. The first one is emblem of villainous traits such as smuggling and murder and 'Chan was also perceived as reinforcing condescending Asian stereotypes such as an alleged incapacity to speak idiomatic English and a tradition-bound and subservient nature'.

Griffith's "That Chink at Golden Gulch" (1910) is a film where Charley Lee, a Chinese man, 'the poor chink' is a mine worker who , although made a central character was shown "walking with bowed legs, head down, crouching and kneeling".

This film is an example where an asian character although centralized has been shown as a weak bodily figure. Another example of Chinese body stereotyping would be *Broken Blossoms*, where Yellow Man is a Fu Manchu figure, whose 'feminine long fingers' have been emphasized , eliminating him of the masculinity and has been shown with a 'long fake braid'.

### III.Kato ,the Beginner Role of Bruce as the Bias-breaker and Latter Films

Bruce debuted in the TV series “The Green Hornet” as the faithful sidekick Kato in 1966. Lee refused to follow the American director’s expectation of fisticuff fights and insisted that he be allowed to use his martial arts skills. They became so popular with the audience that Van Williams, who played the Green Hornet, asked to be taught some moves. In a crossover episode of **Batman** from the same time , Kato has a battle with Robin that ends in a draw (the same thing happens simultaneously with their senior partners). This was in part because Lee refused to participate in a fight that showed Asian-style martial arts being defeated; the original script had the Green Hornet and Kato being beaten by Batman and Robin”. Because of Lee’s projection of Kato , whose nationality is considered throughout his character-history (since 1936 in The Green Hornet franchise) as an asian, the character becomes an expert in art of war with martial arts skills , not just a mechanic. Indeed, The Green Hornet was the first program and Kato was the first character through which Bruce broke the prejudiced stereotyping of asian character for the first time. After that Bruce’s film career started to spark, giving him opportunities for breaking the negative asian male stereotype images, opening up new possibilities for him as representative of Asian-americans or Asians.

Here are some specific examples of how Bruce Lee’s films challenged negative stereotypes of Asian men:

- 1) In the film *Fist of Fury* , Lee’s character, Chen Zhen, defeats a white Russian gang boss (Petrov).
- 2) In the film *Enter the Dragon*, Lee’s character, Lee Kwan, is a Chinese Shaolin monk who travels to Hong Kong to compete in a martial arts tournament. In the tournament, Lee defeats a number of opponents, including a white American boxer.

These scenes showed that Asian men were not only capable of fighting, but that they could also defeat white men in a fair fight.

- 3) In the film *The Way of the Dragon*, Lee’s character, Tang Lung, defends a Chinese restaurant from a group of Italian gangsters. In the scene of fight with these gangsters, we see Bruce with his Chinese friends confronting them, and then one of Bruce’s companions tried to fight with a fat mob , but got punched in the face and got knocked out before even starting and another mob makes fun of him and says mockingly –“Chinese Boxing! ”A companion of Lee’s character says with rage- “Bastard! We will get him at the end... he would see Chinese boxing can beat any of his barbaric tricks.” Bruce stands up against them and beat up all of those bandits with Chinese boxing. This scene showed that chinese men were not only capable of fighting, but that they were also willing to stand up for their community for defying any racist attitude to them.

Although these films are not Hollywood films, but as these films have been screened in english and became popular worldwide because of Bruce Lee playing the lead who was already a pop-culture icon for his action-packed scenes, and at the same time as they showed Asians using hand to hand combat skills , these films challenged the stereotypical view toward the Asians or Chinese shown in films to the western audience, which include people of the Hollywood studios and posed a threat to the continuation of stereotyping of asian characters in Hollywood.

#### IV. Against Anti-chinese Racism in Films

The film *'Fist of Fury'* is culturally significant for Chinese nationalism. Here Bruce played the role of a Chinese student (Chen Zhen) who retaliates against racist attitude of Japanese toward Chinese students of Chen's Jing Wu school.

We see Bruce's character Chen breaking the sign bearing the writing 'Sick Man of East Asia' which was presented to Jing Wu school apparently addressing their recently dead master, "describing the Chinese as weaklings in comparison to the Japanese". "The phrase 'Sick man of Asia', or 'Sick man of East Asia' (Chinese: 東亞病夫) when referring specifically to China, is a discriminatory term for Chinese people."

"Chen Zhen goes to the Hongkou dojo alone to return the sign, winds up fighting the Japanese students, defeating all of them, including their sensei, single-handedly. He smashes the glass on the sign and makes the students who taunted him earlier chew up the paper bearing the derogatory words". In the same movie, we see another scene where we see Chen, Bruce's character going to take a stroll afterwards at a park, where he is stopped by the guard showing him the signboard bearing the writing "DOGS AND CHINESE ARE NOT ALLOWED". We see Chen breaking the board by giving it a jumping kick.

Thus Lee's film characters presented Chinese nationalism and also anti-racist attitude which in a way gave the message that any type of stereotyping toward Chinese people is unwelcome and will not be endured by a Chinese.

#### V. Bruce Personally against Racist Stereotype

In personal life too, Bruce broke negative racist stereotypical attitude of people. According to the book, "Bruce Lee : The Man Only I Knew", Bruce's biography penned by his wife, we get to know about an event where Bruce is challenged by Wong Jack Man who was against his teaching martial arts to non-chinese people, Bruce accepts the challenge announcing it to be a no holds barred fight and won the challenge. Bruce didn't set any barrier for learning martial arts. 'That the art should only be taught to Chinese, Bruce considered such thinking completely outmoded and when it was argued that white men, if taught the secrets, would use the art to injure Chinese, pointed out that if a white man really wanted to hurt a Chinese, there were plenty of other ways he could do it'(Lee 69-71). The fight lasted only for few minutes with a decisive victory to Bruce (Lee 73).

Through these dominant characters and their rebellious attitude, Bruce Lee broke the negative stereotyped portrayal of asian men on screen.

#### VI. Post Bruce Lee Era:

Now, the question is -What about the post Bruce Lee Era -the projection of Asians or Asian-americans in Hollywood after his death? Was this breaking of negative stereotyping limited only in Bruce Lee's figure?

Now, the answer would be a No as after Lee's death, Hollywood didn't go back to asians' stereotyped depiction and to justify this, we will look into some examples. But before that, one fact must be noteworthy and that is for the character of the Asians, while we used to see non-asian western actors playing the role of Asians with 'yellowface' mask, that practice has been obliterated with only few rare exceptions.

"Enter the Dragon" was one of the martial arts films casting Chinese or asian actors that got unprecedented worldwide fame and recognition among worldwide audiences. This joint American-Chinese production film earning a little more than 470 times of its original budget, is notable not only for popularising martial arts and introducing Lee's charismatic persona to the West, but also as the film which changed the view of Asians

completely by portraying them as actors with Hand-to-hand combat skills through characters like that of Lee and Bolo. This opened the door for Asians playing leads in Hollywood.”The past couple of years have seen an explosion of nuanced stories featuring Asian American leads in major films and TV series like ‘The Farewell’ (2019) , ‘Searching’ (2018), ‘Minari’(2020) , ‘Always Be My Maybe’ (2019) , ‘Never Have I Ever’(2020), and the Netflix movie ‘To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before’(2018)”.

‘Crazy Rich Asians’ was “the first studio film since 1993’s ‘The Joy Luck Club’ to feature an all-Asian ensemble.”

Jackie Chan’s name must be mentioned in this regard, who has made his appearance in several Hollywood films and has emerged as one of the most popular asian Hollywood actors. His most remarkable movies include *The Karate Kid* (2010) , a successful and popular film, where his role as Karate instructor won hearts and *Rush Hour* (1998) ,where he played an asian (Hong Kong) detective, and cultural differences is shown against his team partner Carter. In the film “Hidden Strike”(2023) , Jackie plays a Chinese security contractor and this film dominated the platform of Netflix within 24 hours of its release.

“Chinese film actor Jet Li is also noted for his superlative martial arts skills and for his portrayals of virtuous, humble heroes. His first non-Chinese film role was as a villain in the 1998 buddy cop action film *Lethal Weapon 4* with Mel Gibson and Danny Glover. His first leading role in a Hollywood film was as Han Sing in the 2000 martial arts action film *Romeo Must Die* with Aaliyah”.

The data above shows that the Asian Stereotyping in Hollywood is no more there in effect that it had been before Bruce Lee and even after his death, Asians have played unbiased leads and prominent positive roles in Hollywood films in 21<sup>st</sup> century. It can be wound up that Bruce broke the negative stereotyping of Asians in Hollywood for once and all, not only for his time but also for his successor generation of asian actors too which is still in effect. So, Hollywood has heartily welcomed Asians featuring film with major box office success.

## VII. TV Series and Biopic showing Bruce facing and fighting against racism

In his biopic film and biographical TV series , scenarios have been made regarding Bruce Lee’s personal life for showing him as fighting against and facing racism.

In Bruce’s slightly fictionalized biopic *Dragon : The Bruce Lee Story* , the negative stereotypes are shown that didn’t even spare the legendary icon himself because of the prejudiced bias. In the biopic, there is a scene of Lee’s acting on set of *The Green Hornet* where a crew member is asking the producer for getting assurance to make sure that Lee always keeps his mask on as if he had a premonition that Lee’s mask might fall off face at a moment, and if that happens, his asian look would come out.

Crew: “Listen, there’s uhh.. there’s one small problem”

Producer: “ What is it?”

Crew: “It’s this guy Lee. You know he is awfully oriental.”

Producer: “He is supposed to be oriental.”

Crew: “Yeah.”

Producer: “He is playing oriental.”

Crew: “I know, I know.”

Producer: “Kato is oriental.”

Crew: “I know. I know. Can you just make sure he keeps the mask on?”

So, one may ask the question – ‘Is it true that Bruce Lee had to wear a mask in **The Green Hornet** to hide his oriental physical features? The answer would be a No.

Bruce Lee played the character of Kato, who was originally portrayed as a Japanese character in the radio series. However, when adapting the character for TV series not only Bruce’s character Kato, but his partner Green Hornet was also shown wearing a mask because Kato and his assistant both are fictional characters who appear as masked persons indeed in their fictional setting originally.

So, this scene is supposed to be fictional and we don’t have any evidence as authentication of this scene from his biographical text by Linda.

Another fictional scene in the same film is where a group of college jockies come in gym where Bruce is doing workout with equipment and one guy starts making racist comment about his ‘Kind’ seeing his Chinese or Korean -like facial feature, calling his race as “Gooks, chinks”. Then we see Bruce inviting him to a fight and then beating him.

However, there is also a scene in the film inspired by earlier mentioned true account penned by Linda in her book about Bruce where Bruce defeats Wong Jack Man, who wanted to limit Martial Arts training to Chinese only. After winning, Bruce says in the film – “I teach whom I want”. This shows his true anti-racist tone, as in real life too Bruce didn’t make any segregation regarding reception of his students as a martial arts teacher. This outlook of him truly matches his notion – “Under the heavens, the sky, there is but one family” (referring to Humanity), when he was asked about his origin – “Are you a Chinese?”. “You know what I think of myself? As a human being” was his immediate answer.

Second example of Bruce being shown as an anti-racist would be Chinese TV series **The Legend of Bruce Lee**, where “Bruce Lee (Li Xiao Long) is a high school student in a school with mostly British students, with the Chinese students like him belonging in the minority. Bruce notices to his dismay that there was a subtle discrimination against his race in the school, which urges him to excel in order to prove that Chinese people are also competent and talented. Along with his childhood friend Qin Xiao Man, Bruce participates in a cha-cha competition and wins, much to the annoyance of his British schoolmate Blair Lewis. This competition, in addition to Blair’s evident dislike of the Chinese, creates tension between the two, leading to a number of physical fights. The bitter rivalry between Blair Lewis and Bruce Lee worsened when Bruce joined the school boxing team, whose ace boxer was Blair. The two participate in the school boxing competition, and Blair loses to Bruce. Blair then realizes that unlike him, Bruce had a good chance of winning the boxing championship. He decides to help Bruce by teaching him about the three-time champion David Cafeld. This marks the end of the enmity between the two.”

### **VIII. Markers of Bruce Lee as the bias-breaker through films :**

1. “Bruce Lee was the first Asian male lead in (as the posters for *Enter the Dragon* proudly proclaimed) ‘the first America produced Martial Arts spectacular’ in 1973.” (Bowman 1).

2. He was also the “first Asian male to star on American TV. First, in *The Green Hornet* in 1966 and then in *Longstreet*” (Bowman 1).

## IX. CONCLUSION

From overall data analysis, we can come to the conclusion that Bruce Lee with his martial arts infused fighting skill as unarmed combat action pioneered a new way for Martial Arts films in Hollywood, while at the same time breaking the negative stereotyped depiction of Asians in Hollywood undeniably, which opened a new way for talented asian actors. With his perfect physique and superfast athletic moves, he played the asian patriot characters that represented fighting for the virtuous and at times as a Chinese anti-racist both in his personal life as shown in his biography and biodocumentaries and in fictional films. His legacy of representation of Asians have been carried out by actors like Jackie Chan and Jet Li in Hollywood.

Because of this contribution of Lee, he is credited as the actor who bridged the gap between East and West (Proquest).

He has also been shown in his earlier mentioned biopic as one arousing biased attitude from racists in cases, which were most probably not based on true account. For example, the earlier mentioned fictional scenes (Gym scene and Mask-debate scene) of *Dragon : The Bruce Lee Story*. But, should one show or does one have the right to show such fictional scenes in such legendary icon's biopic or biodocumentary, because biopics or drama series based on one's life-story ought to show only truth, so that the audience can take a glimpse into or get to know about the real-life events, whereas such fantasized inclusions can misinform or misguide the audience by showing exaggerated events or events that didn't take place. This is serious because often or in most cases, the audience can take this as reality and do not go into research of their own to check about every scene that whether it took place or not in reality. However, just to show him as an anti-racist model doesn't mean that anything can be shown esp. In a biopic. At least in such cases, the producer or screenwriter of a biopic must act as a narrator of reality, where he must focus on the recreation of real-life story-scenarios of the model who is being depicted. However, it can be concluded that Bruce Lee was a model for anti-racism and a breaker of racist stereotype both as an actor through his characters and in real-life too.

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