The Persistence of Yellow Peril Discourse

While today some people might say that racism is over, that race no longer matters, or that Dr Martin Luther King's "dream" of a world where children from different racial groups hold each other's hands in friendship has been attained, research focusing on race suggests this is simply not the case. Academics label the mistaken idea that the problem of race has been solved and racism has been eliminated as "race neutrality" or "post-racism." As much as one might wish it no longer existed, racism is difficult to eradicate, and disturbing racial representations, which have deep institutional roots within complex systems of representation, show every sign of persisting well into the future.

For Asian Americans, perhaps the longest-standing stereotypical representation is that of "yellow peril." By yellow peril, we mean representations of Asians and Asian Americans as threatening to take over, invade, or otherwise negatively Asianize the US nation and its society and culture. Usually, yellow peril discourse constructs an Asian-white dialectic emphasizing the powerful, threatening potential of Asians and Asian Americans, while simultaneously constructing whites as vulnerable, threatened, or otherwise in danger. This chapter argues that, by understanding yellow power and by reviewing its history in the media, one can better understand the current condition of Asian Americans, have a position from which to examine critically that condition, and help make relevant social changes to improve it.

Contrary to the popular media story that we all live in a post-racist society, yellow peril has not faded away into the depths of history. Rather, as the title to this chapter highlights, yellow peril persisted throughout the twentieth century and continues in the twenty-first. As a discourse, it is so entrenched within the cultural fabric of the United States that media regularly represent Asians and Asian Americans today as yellow peril.

Scant scholarly attention has been paid to yellow peril as a media discourse specifically. Media discourse includes news articles, TV programs, films, and Internet sites. Discourse is produced and organized
in particular ways and serves as the basis by which ideas are formed and knowledge is produced, and, ultimately, for how people relate to other people and how societies are formed and structured. There is, of course, abundant historical work that discusses yellow peril racism and ideology, but rarely does that research understand yellow peril as a phenomenon created and fanned by the flames of screen media or the press. It is true that yellow peril is a way of thinking, an ideology, and has a psychological component. But, how does an idea gain social acceptance? How does the idea of Asians and Asian Americans as yellow peril circulate? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to study yellow peril media discourse. Thus, in this book, we conceive of yellow peril as something print, film, TV, the Internet, and other media produce, so that media can be critiqued and, ultimately, changed. Additionally, understanding that yellow peril is a media discourse suggests that, like historical, legal, and public policy analysis, media analysis is important to the study of Asian Americans. By recognizing how this media discourse has been constructed historically and continues to exist today, future producers of media armed with knowledge may be able to avoid the trappings of yellow peril themes and to create new representational strategies in order to tell more nuanced, complex, and intelligent stories about Asians and Asian Americans.

**Conceptual Maps and Dominant Views of the World**

There is no one-to-one correlation between what the media construct and what people think, but of course, or even between what media producers “intend” and what ends up on screen. Thus, in order to make sense of media, we must look at cartoons, news articles, TV programs, films, and Internet sites ourselves. Even if we examine contemporary representations of yellow peril in media today, however, in order to understand their significance we must also study the history of yellow peril discourse. We will begin to understand how Asians and Asian Americans are currently located within and identified by a conceptual map of characteristics and are associated with certain stories produced within dominant culture.

In Sut Jhally’s video about Stuart Hall, Representation and the Media, Hall defines an important concept, representation, in terms of what he calls “conceptual maps,” what he also refers to as “maps of meaning” or “frameworks of intelligibility.” These are those concepts and memories of experiences unique to individuals that help dictate how dominant ideas of the world come into being. As Hall writes:

> Now it could be the case that the conceptual map which I carry around my head is totally different from yours, in which case you and

Because most dominant, mainstream media makers form their own ideas based on their subjective knowledge of and experiences with Asians and Asian Americans, powerful representations such as yellow peril may come into existence and, then, may help to define for the broader society who Asians and Asian Americans are.

Language, images, and communication more broadly offer people the ability to compare conceptual maps to determine the degree of overlap and agreement, the degree to which one person’s experiences approximate those of another. In a sense, language, signs, body language, images, and communication are, as Hall puts it, externalizations of our meanings and conceptual maps. Once a word has been uttered, assuming another person is within earshot, that externalization becomes public communication with a public value. Unlike memories in our heads that remain private to us, externalizations through symbols are sharable and available for consideration, discussion, and engagement. We can compare our experiences to those externalized by others and, likewise, how others view reality to the way we view it, often through, as Hall suggests, conversations and dialogues. However, beyond conversations, certain privileged externalizations are disseminated widely—in large part by the media—and may ultimately become part of public memory.

**Origin and Proliferation of Yellow Peril Discourse**

In this chapter, we trace a selective history of yellow peril media discourse, illustrating its historical persistence and, thus, its structural embeddedness in the media. By structural embeddedness, we mean that some discourse exists across different sectors of society, is reproduced across time, space, and media, and is not easily changed or eliminated. First, we recount a history using scholarship that has described different episodes of yellow peril discourse. We focus on its origins and effects before investigating twentieth-century examples of yellow peril in the United States, paying particular attention to discourse in early cinema and in World War II newsprint and to the complex relationship between media representations and historical and social events and contexts. We end the chapter by examining the current situation, moving from anti-Japanese news discourse of the 1980s and
anti-Chinese discourse in the 1990s to representations of Asian and Asian American gangsters in film.

While fears of yellow peril began to be spread broadly in the late nineteenth century, the conceptual framework for the term had much earlier origins. Gary Okihiro suggests the idea may date back to the fifth century BCE, as a way of thinking about the Persians by the Greeks (1994, 119). In her book on "yellow peril" themes in Hollywood films, Gina Marchetti suggests the concept was rooted in medieval fears of Genghis Khan and Mongolian invasions of Europe. She writes, "Yellow peril combines racist terror of alien cultures, sexual anxieties, and the belief that the West will be overpowered and enveloped by the irresistible, dark, occult forces of the East" (1993, 2). Thus, yellow peril discourse and imagery racializes xenophobia; those in the West can then widely distribute this representation of the East.

At its height in the late nineteenth century, yellow peril discourse constructed an image of Chinese people in which "nonwhite people are by nature physically and intellectually inferior, morally suspect, heathen, licentious, disease-ridden, feral, violent, uncivilized, infantile, and in need of the guidance of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants" (Marchetti, 1993, 3). In his discussion of depictions of Asian Americans in juvenile literature, J. Frederick MacDonald provides a thorough summary of the yellow peril representation of Chinese and Chinese Americans at the turn of the twentieth century. He suggests there was a general fear of Chinese inundating America. The images ranged from Chinese running opium dens, to emphasizing the "strange" dress of Chinese men who wore their hair in queues, to the mythology constructed around white slavery by Chinese who sought white women for physical and sexual labor, to a profusion of ideas concerning Chinese moral depravity and depredations. According to MacDonald, Chinese were depicted as wearing pigtailis, speaking with exaggerated dialects, and then portrayed as "stupid because American heroes cannot understand their speech" (1978, 162). They were compared with animals such as horses, were not trustworthy, inspired fear, were said to smell vilely and to smoke opium. In the book Coming Man (Choy, Dong, and Hom, 1995), cartoons published in high profile magazines such as Puck, Harper's Weekly, and The Wasp depict Chinese Americans as heathens, frequenters of opium dens and gambling houses, managers of white slavery, and as animal-like. A striking feature of the cartoons in magazines and other visual materials in the book is that, regardless of the degree of sympathy depicted in the images, the exaggerated physical features of Chinese people mock them as inhuman and as other.

Importantly, the depictions of Chinese people in media were not operating within a vacuum but were connected to and concurrent with US policies concerning the perceived yellow peril. For example, yellow peril discourse preceded and continued to play a role in the passage of new legislation that restricted Chinese migration. As Eugene Franklin Wong writes, during the Chinese exclusion era, Chinese were perceived as being "non-Western in dress, language, religion, customs, and eating habits," as "human oddities," mysterious, unassimilable, and "completely immoral" (1978, vi-vii). Chinese women were "trumpets," with an "exotic strain of venereal disease," and a "danger to both the health and morals of America" (ibid., vii).

Chineses were an "opium smoking" and "gambling" lot – hence prone to vice, which could become infectious – and were both cowardly and passive (ibid., viii–ix). Popular figures of the day, such as Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens), portrayed China in degrading ways as a matter of course. Twain commented: "The Yellow Terror is threatening this world to-day. It is looming vast and ominous on that distant horizon. I do not know what is going to be the result of that Yellow Terror, but our government has had no hand in evoking it, and let's be happy in that and proud of it" (1923, 200). Indeed, the US government induced measures to stop Chinese migration. The Angell Treaty of 1880 specified that China would self-limit Chinese workers planning migration to the United States. Additional legislation included the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which "was the first federal law to bar immigration on the basis of race and class." Subsequent legislation in 1884, 1888, 1892, 1893, 1898, 1901, 1902, and 1904 further limited Chinese migration to the United States (Choy, Dong, and Hom, 1995, 19–20). To all intents and purposes, because of these exclusion acts – fueled by yellow peril discourse and legal and policy debates – after 1882, large-scale legal migration of Chinese to the United States was curtailed until the late 1960s. During the exclusion era, many images such as those shown in figure 2.1 appeared.

As this apocalyptic image graphically illustrates, yellow peril, or "yellow terror," as the cartoon has it, is both a gendered and a racialized discourse. Here, yellow peril, embodied in the figure of the Chinese man, who phallically wields a smoking gun and simultaneously sports a lengthy, curvy, fraying queue (which along with his apparel and distorted facial features demonstrates his absolute alterity), represents a mortal threat to white women, and thus to all she represents for the nation. Absent in the image is a figure of a white male, ostensibly the reader to whom the image is directed and from whom compensatory action is sought, and the Asian or Asian American woman, a character apparently not relevant to a narrative of an alien, masculine threat to the nation. To complete the reasoning of the image, in order to protect white women and the nation from further trespass and violation from animalistic and violent Chinese
aggression, white men must act and potentially eliminate the lawless Chinese aggressor.

Yellow peril found its way into twentieth-century discourse as well. Robert Lee suggests early twentieth-century yellow peril may have emerged out of fears of Anglo-Saxon race suicide. He writes, "The American transformation from republic to (comparatively small) empire created anxieties about new immigration and 'racial suicide.' These anxieties were voiced in debates over nationality, naturalization, and family in which the Oriental was consolidated as the Yellow Peril" (1999, 106). Thus, yellow peril discourse, first used broadly to rationalize the expulsion of Chinese people, became entrenched and later seemed to threaten the very future of the white race. As the twentieth century progressed, yellow peril discourse continued to circulate, marking both Chinese and Chinese Americans and Asians and Asian American communities as threats.

**Silent Threat on the Silver Screen: Yellow Peril in Early Cinema**

Whereas writing and imagery of yellow peril in the late nineteenth century appeared in print in newspapers and mainstream magazines, similar representations emerged in turn of the twentieth-century cinema, even after Chinese migration to the United States had largely been curtailed. Eugene Wong (1978) mentions films that draw on yellow peril imagery in the silent film era, such as The Heathen Chinese and the Sunday School Teachers (1904) and The Chinese Rubbersnecks (1903), in which a Chinese laundrman with a queue is chased.

Particularly well-known silent films such as The Cheat (1915) and Broken Blossoms (1919) construct yellow peril specifically by problematizing Asian-white interracial sexual relationships, representing the Asian and Asian American man as a threat not only to the white woman or girl but also to the structure of the white patriarchal family and to white civilization writ large. To illustrate this idea, it is helpful to read Broken Blossoms in more detail, taking account of the social and political context of the time. To start, we think it is instructive to examine the film in relation to the cartoon "The Yellow Terror in all his Glory" (figure 2.1). The main difference between the two is that, in the film, "Yellow Man" (as the film names him) has a romantic rather than a violent sexual desire for, and encounter with, a white girl, "Lucy" (whom he calls "White Blossom"). However, as in the cartoon, Yellow Man figures as a threat to white society: after Lucy's father, "Battling," has beaten her severely, he finds out she is living above Yellow Man's shop, where she has taken refuge to recover from her father's beating. Battling goes to the shop, destroys Yellow Man's room, takes Lucy back home, drags her through a hole in the wooden door he has made with an axe in the closet where she has run to hide, and beats her to death with a whip. When Yellow Man finds Lucy missing from his room, he grabs a gun and goes to Battling's home to look for her. There, he finds her lifeless body. Battling then enters from an adjoining room, but, before he can initiate an attack on Yellow Man with an axe, Yellow Man shoots and kills him. Yellow Man carries Lucy's corpse away from Battling's home and lays her on his own bed, as if on an altar, before plunging a dagger into his own heart, falling down in a crumpled pile next to her body to die.
Peter Feng has submitted it is a misreading of *Broken Blossoms* to suggest, as at least one critic has done, that the East is portrayed favorably in the film (2002b, 4-5), despite the fact that the white man, Battling, is depicted as horrifyingly aggressive and mean and that the film does not shy away from representing interracial erotics as a possibility (if not a reality) in lower-class parts of cities, where the races live together. It is true that pugilism, alcoholism, domestic abuse, and in general what is problematically constructed as lower-class white masculinity are foregrounded in the character of Battling. For instance, we find out that he regularly beats his daughter Lucy, holds the fifteen-year-old hostage in his home, and forces her to cook for him. However, Yellow Man is no hero either. Like Battling, he lives in the same poor part of town. Where Battling drinks alcohol, Yellow Man smokes opium. And, like Battling, Yellow Man comes to the end of his life. But Battling is murdered, whereas Yellow Man meets his fate by his own dagger, enacting a Madame Butterfly-like suicide.

*Broken Blossoms* does deviate from the editorial cartoon in important ways. Yellow Man does not rape and murder the white woman in the film as *Yellow Terror* implicitly does in the cartoon, although everyone but Lucy and Yellow Man imagine a forbidden sexual encounter, if not relationship, having been consummated between them. A white man figures prominently in the film but is absent in, though implicitly addressed by, the cartoon. And while the film constructs Yellow Man as more feminine, his counterpart in the cartoon is more aggressive.

Yet, in both, the white woman dies in the end. And, like the Yellow Terror, Yellow Man is an irreconcilable sexual threat to women, and thus to what is good, wholesome, and pure (and what needs to be protected) about society, and an alien other that requires elimination. Despite being figured as more of an aggressor in the cartoon, Yellow Man nevertheless uses a gun, one that smokes, too, as he kills Battling. Like the Yellow Terror, Yellow Man is feminized and desexualized, often pictured stroking his face with his hand, and repeatedly retreating from kissing Lucy to consummate their relationship, not only as the film indicates because of the purity of their relationship, but also implicitly because of a consciousness of the social strictures against miscegenation.

The film goes beyond the cartoon in important ways, in part because of the technology of film, because it tells a narrative, but also because it more literally renders Yellow Man animal-like. Yellow Man is constructed as alien through the use of yellowface make-up that both renders the white actor's body not white and simultaneously draws attention to features that render Chinese different from whites. The film treats Yellow Man's Buddhist non-violence as not serious through shots of his addictive use of opium, his fawning and obsequious ineffectual sexuality in Lucy's presence, and particularly when the narrative culminates in his, at least in part, vengeful murder of Battling. He is also constructed throughout the film as primitive, his eyes almost nearly shut and his body pictured in a stooped position, his head as if in a perpetual bow. This representation of Yellow Man's otherness, primitivity, and asexuality (despite his longing for a white woman), renders him an indisputable threat to masculinity, if not a threat of impurity in the Anglo-Saxon genetic stock. If the film figures Battling's hyper-masculinity as excessive, and therefore as not acceptable within bourgeois, heterosexual normalcy, Yellow Man's hypermasculination, his alienness, and his lack of humanity, while perhaps more agreeable to heterosexual white girlhood, pose a much greater and profound threat of dilution to Anglo-Saxon masculinity and a white racial project. In a sense, the film suggests Yellow Man is poor mating material; if Lucy and he were to have children, the logic of the film goes, future Anglo-Saxons would be less than masculine, normal, and human.

While the film, through intertitles, does construct Yellow Man's Eastern philosophical and religious non-violence somewhat sympathetically, as Gina Marchetti suggests (1993, 34-43), and constructs Battling as a brute whose fatal end is expected, if not deserved, it also...
shows no sympathy for Yellow Man in the eyes of the law, despite the
fact that his encounter with Lucy was not of his making, but was in fact
a result of Battling’s physical abuse of her, and despite the fact that he
kills Battling in self-defense. The film gives Yellow Man no way out: his
existence within white society is simply irreconcilable, given the need
for white racial survival. The speed with which the Spy, the police, and
other men are assembled to hunt down Yellow Man suggests that, if he
does not kill himself, they will do it for him. Thus, the film does not
question the larger moral viewpoint that miscegenation between
white and Asian is not tolerable and that, if it occurs, the death of the
Asian man who trespasses the moral and sexual boundary is to be
assumed, regardless of whether or not he would otherwise be a symp-
pathetic character. Indeed, the film suggests that the Asian man knows
as well as the rest of society that romance and sexuality across racial
lines is forbidden and must be met with death, which is why he seeks
the more respectable end of killing himself.}

**Archetypes of Yellow Peril**

While *Broken Blossoms* allows for a detailed study of the yellow peril
representation of Asians and Asian Americans in film, the quintessential
representation of yellow peril emerged in the iconic figure of Dr Fu
Manchu. From 1923, when the English film *The Mystery of Dr Fu Manchu*
was made, to 1940, when *The Drums of Fu Manchu* was released, a series
of films constructed this character.

The first US version of Fu Manchu was *The Mysterious Dr Fu Manchu*
(1929). Originally created in England, Sax Rohmer’s character Dr Fu
Manchu was imported into the United States. Wong suggests Rohmer
had little contact or knowledge about Chinese people but viewed
Chinatown fantastically: “With his limited contact with real Chinese
and his generous imaginal conception of Chinatown, Rohmer, the
man who created the single outstanding personification of anti-
Sinicism, confessed his ignorance of the Chinese people, stating: ‘I
made my name on Fu Manchu because I know nothing about the
Chinese’” (1978, 97-8). Dr Fu Manchu was diabolical, sinister, and evil,
a particular, masculine representation of yellow peril – an image that
continued into television in the 1940s and 1950s (ibid., 101–2). Thus
this villainous character functioned across time to maintain a dis-
course of yellow peril and intersected with many other film and media
representations, such as “Emperor Ming, the Merciless” (Charles
Middleton) in the *Flash Gordon* films, which began in 1936.

Yachinson Chan suggests that Fu Manchu is a projection of
Western desires for manifest destiny; hence, Fu Manchu, while being

de-sensualized, is projected as being aggressive, domineering, and
hypevirile (2001, 16). As the incarnation of yellow peril, he “perpetu-
ates the myth that the Chinese, and by extension, Asians, are trying to
take over the Western world” (ibid., 27). Chan adds that, “at the end of
each novel, the yellow peril is contained in spite of the exaggerated
threat posed by the scheming Chinese man. White male supremacy, as
an ideological construct, is reestablished as Asian men are ritualisti-
cally vilified in order to maintain a sense of superiority among White
men” (ibid., 28).

Fu Manchu exhibits the ambivalence that we describe early on in the
book. On the one hand he is fascinating, on the other he inspires fear. As Chan writes, “Dr. Fu Manchu is a Chinese Satan who, on the surface,
is cat-like, calm and implacable but will strike you at any moment for
no apparent reason” (2001, 33). Importantly, Fu Manchu represents the
diametrical opposition of East and West. Chan continues, “the image
of Dr. Fu Manchu encompasses both Eastern and Western characteris-
tics (the brows, face, and cat-green eyes), reducing the character to a
brilliant mutant. The ideological implication here is the perpetuation
or confirmation of the cultural incommensurability between East and
West” (ibid., 34). He is a representation of the threat of invasion and of
a person addicted to vice. Important to his image is his totalitarian
desire, which manifests itself in his sexual lust for and ultimate
domination over white Western women. What makes him particularly frightening is his scientific experiments with hybrids, hence his "fascination with miscegenation and genetic hybridity" (ibid., 41). Ultimately, he is constructed as lacking sensuality; his sexuality can be best described as that of "an asexual rapist who uses force to capture his women in order to breed superior offspring" (ibid., 44).

Up to this time, the majority of yellow peril discourse focused on Chinese and Chinese Americans. As Darrell Hamamoto argues, much of Asian American media representation is directly linked to US foreign policy, as we have seen with the link between yellow peril discourse and the exclusion of Chinese migration. Thus, following Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, a spate of anti-Japanese imagery appeared, reconstructing the yellow peril, this time in relation to Japanese and Japanese Americans. While there had been significant anti-Japanese movements throughout the century preceding World War II, yellow peril media discourse peaked after the Pearl Harbor bombing. Caricatures of Japanese depicted them as rat-like, as uncaring animals, and as inscrutable, villainous, and treacherous. The post-Pearl Harbor imagery of Japanese shared much in common with the exclusion-era imagery of Chinese and Chinese Americans, albeit with some added features. As Michael Shull and David Wilt suggest about the portrayal of the Japanese as the enemy in World War II films, "As for the Japanese, a generalized prewar Asian stereotype was crudely supplemented by glasses, buckteeth and the mordantly delivered 'so sorry' " (1996, 143).

World War II Hollywood propaganda depicted the Japanese as barbarians, "fanatical near-savages, sneaky, dirty fighters" (Wong, 1978, 156). As Wong suggests, "The otherwise inhuman characteristics of early Asians in America were integrated into the Asian enemy, the competitor, the unfair and degrading threat to white labor, the culturally peculiar aliens whose low standard of living paralleled their own low value on human life, and the secretive Japanese farmer who was under his coveralls a barbaric samurai ready at a moment's notice to spearhead an invasion of white, Christian America" (ibid., 150). Through images created by Hollywood in particular, Wong notes that "Hollywood was able to manipulate the image of Japanese so as to create in the process intense and highly racist attitudes among non-Asian Americans for the Japanese, and ultimately for all Asians" (ibid., 146). Not surprisingly, then, the first World War II film, the Academy Award-winning and box-office hit Wake Island (1942), highlighted the deviousness of the Japanese and emphasized that Pearl Harbor was a sneak attack. Like Wake Island, The Purple Heart (1944) participated in the propagandistic representations of racist yellow peril. Japanese were portrayed as savage and sadistic, but also as subhuman (ibid., 157).

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At the end of World War II, representations shifted from the Japanese, Germans, and Italians as threats to the danger of communism. In this context, once again, fear of Chinese made its way into cinema. As Wong writes, "The United States Government and the American motion picture industry, contrariwise, had not only succeeded in firmly establishing anti-Asianism in the public mind, but had also in the process set a backlog of anti-Asiatic imagery that would prove movable from one Asian group to another as international conditions changed" (1978, 168).
Wong suggests through his discussion of films that, although World War II had ended, themes developed during the war years continued. While historically, as we have shown, yellow peril discourses often have been tied to questions of war, politics, and immigration, the fact that the discourses are so well established (and naturalized in these contexts) makes them easily available for other uses. In the next section, we look at more recent examples of yellow peril to illustrate the similarities of representations over time and their cross-applicability to multiple Asian ethnic groups. Without providing an exhaustive review, here we present a few illustrations of more contemporary yellow peril imagery. We start with a discussion of a series of anti-Asian events and of the news media representations of those events, and then move to a discussion of the film *The Fast and the Furious* (2001) in order to emphasize the way in which the discourses in fictional media intersect with and support news media as yellow peril discourse continues on into the present.

**Yellow Peril Persists**

Since yellow peril media discourse is historically entrenched, its themes of Asians as savage, merciless, immoral, subhuman, and a threat to white women and whites in general have been reproduced in more contemporary media representations of Asians and Asian Americans. More recent instances of yellow peril discourse have been linked to questions about the labor force (e.g., exporting "US jobs" and the loss of state secrets [e.g., Wen Ho Lee]) and commodity globalization (e.g., danger of Chinese-made toys with lead paint). In light of the historical representations of yellow peril, of anti-Chinese and anti-Japanese sentiment, we see the tropes of yellow peril arising in the Vincent Chin case in the 1980s, fear of Japanese economic power in the 1980s and 1990s, the scapegoating of John Huang and Wen Ho Lee in the 1990s, and the post-9/11 actions as they ultimately affected South Asians and South Asian Americans.

In the 1980s, as gas prices were on the rise, the US auto industry went into a serious slump, just as the sale of inexpensive, fuel-efficient Japanese cars escalated. The area quite possibly hardest hit was Detroit — the home of the US auto industry and known worldwide for making large eight-cylinder cars — which suffered from mass layoffs at automobile plants. In 1982, Vincent Chin, a 27-year-old Chinese American autoworker, was bludgeoned to death in Detroit by two white autoworkers (Ronald Ebens and his stepson Michael Nitz); Nitz had recently been laid off. The film *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1987) suggests this violence was an outgrowth of racial tensions in Detroit at the time and documents the local media's representations of those tensions. Helen Zia, one of the main activists and journalists investigating the Vincent Chin case, writes that friends of Chin's at the bar where he was on the night he was attacked "overheard Ebens say 'Chink,' 'Nip,' and 'fucker.' One of the dancers heard Ebens shout at Vincent Chin, 'It's because of motherfuckers like you that we're out of work'" (2000, 59). Ebens misrecognized Chinese American Vincent Chin as a Japanese foreigner and economic threat, thus reproducing the anti-Japanese sentiment, and resulting anti-Asian sentiment, in Detroit and in the rest of the United States at the time.

The swell of anti-Japan discourse rose to a fever pitch throughout the 1980s, perhaps culminating in the early 1990s. In December, 1991, fifty years after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the owner of the Seattle Mariners put the team up for sale. A national furor arose over the prospective and eventual buyers of the team, an investment group consisting of four white investors and one Japanese American. However, because the majority investor, the Japanese American—’s father-in-law, was Hiroshi Yamauchi, owner of Nintendo, news media across the country suggested this was akin to another “Pearl Harbor.” The pending purchase of the team was likened to a takeover of the nation, what many feared was the mixing of Japanese money with US money, or what Ono (1997) calls economic miscegenation. The fear was that, whereas at Pearl Harbor Japan threatened to take over the US military, Japan's threat today is an economic one, and the United States, unwares, would be taken over by Japanese money.

Following the disaggregation of the Soviet Union as a communist bloc and the martial put-down of political unrest at Tiananmen Square, there was some of the most virulent anti-Chinese yellow peril discourse since the exclusion era (Ling-chi Wang, 1998). During the mid-1990s, media discourse emerged surrounding John Huang, a Democratic fundraiser for President Clinton who was accused of taking donations from wealthy Chinese contributors. In what is referred to as “DonorGate,” naturalized Asian American citizens used foreign or transnational ties to elicit donations from overseas business for the Democratic National Committee. Despite the fact that such campaign gifts were common in US politics, a hunt, led by Fred Thompson, ensued to ferret out evidence of campaign gifts from China in particular. News media discourse then characterized John Huang based on well-worn yellow peril imagery, constructing him as mysterious and inscrutable (Ono, 2005, 3). News media used the affair to offer a general characterization of President Bill Clinton’s relationship with China. A March 24, 1997, cover of the conservative news magazine the *National Review* racialized the larger issue of campaign donations, relying on early yellow peril imagery. The cover contained caricatures...
of Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton, and Al Gore in yellowface, buck-toothed and wearing clothing associated with China and implying some sort of nefarious or improper relationship between the US administration and China. John Huang, one of the most powerful Asian Americans in US politics at the time, became the primary scapegoat, but additional Asian Americans, primarily Chinese Americans, then came under a new rebadging era of surveillance.

A similar kind of persecution followed: In 1999, Los Alamos nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee was accused of being a spy. As a nuclear scientist, he was alleged to have given key nuclear information to China. Despite having lived in the United States for thirty-five years, having been naturalized for twenty-five years, and having been a Los Alamos scientist whose work strengthened US national defense and security, Lee was accused of handing over top-secret information that would augment China's nuclear profile. News media in the United States took the opportunity to invoke themes of yellow peril. Lee was described as “sly,” “uncooperative,” “quiet,” “mysterious,” and “deceptive” (Ono, 2002, 79). As Ono argues, news media rhetoric about Wen Ho Lee drew “on paranoia, dramatically construct[ed] the nation as vulnerable masculine body fearful of masculine penetration, [was] prone to construct[ing] the other as primitive and the self as technologically superior, and construct[ed] the other as a potential threat to the body of the nation” (ibid., 82). In other words, news media rhetoric invoked yellow peril themes and fears to construct Wen Ho Lee as a deceptive and sneaky person, infiltrating the US from within, stealing nuclear secrets, and compromising US safety.

Yellow peril themes permeated media representations to construct Huang and Lee as threats to American democracy and safety. As a result, the media imply, US Americans must act accordingly—whether the evidence is there or not—to protect US interests. This yellow peril discourse about China continued building until September 11, 2001, when discourse about Arab and Arab American demonization took over as a response to the collapse of the World Trade Center twin towers and as a prelude to war. As we have seen, yellow peril themes are ready templates and frames that can be drawn upon by media producers and politicians to characterize events, in this case 9/11.

Given the pervasiveness of the news media's production of yellow peril discourse, and given the history of the relationship between such discourse and social events (such as Pearl Harbor) and its depictions in fictional films, it should be no surprise that a number of films and television shows at the turn of the twenty-first century continue to thematize yellow peril. Here, we offer a more extended analysis of The Fast and the Furious in order to illustrate the persistence and complexity of yellow peril discourse in contemporary media. In the first movie in the series, Asian American characters represent yellow peril in the form of gangsters who are the lead suspects in an electronics hijacking ring. The character of Johnny Tran, played by actor Rick Yune, is a villain, the leader of the Asian American gang involved in the sports compact scene. Tran is a character to be feared, so much so that even Dominic Toretto, played by the hypermasculine Vin Diesel, fears being the subject of his wrath. In an early scene titled “Big Trouble in Little Saigon,” Toretto and O’Conner, played by Paul Walker, flee the police, only to be surrounded by a gang of Asian Americans riding motorcycles and brandishing Uzis. The gang escorts Toretto and O’Conner to a stop and they exit the car, surrounded by Tran’s gang. Speaking to Toretto, Tran states, “I thought we had an agreement. You stay away, I stay away. Everybody stays happy.” Toretto replies, “We got lost Johnny. What do you want me to tell you?” A tension-filled conversation ensues and culminates with Tran letting them go, only to come back and shoot at Toretto and O’Conner’s prized car until it erupts into a fiery blaze. In a later scene, Tran preys upon an old white man’s garage shop and threatens him when he discovers that their cars have no engines. Tran eventually tortures the old man by pumping motor oil into his mouth until he volunteers the information about the missing engines. Tran concludes the scene by saying “Ted [the old white man], kiss my shoes.” Coughing, Ted crawls over to kiss Tran’s shoes, only to have Tran kick him away. These scenes illustrate the tired trope of the Asian American gangster, a rehash of yellow peril. Asian Americans are merciless and deceptive. Tran misleads Toretto and O’Conner into believing that they have been spared and then comes back to destroy their car. Ted crawls over to kiss Tran’s shoes only to be kicked while down. In this film, Asian Americans are evil and dubious, cold and unrelenting, and a danger to US business via hijackings and torture.

Whereas each yellow peril representation figured Asians and Asian Americans as threats to white women, US American jobs, and the moral fabric of the United States, yellow peril continues into the 1980s and 1990s as threats to US economic prosperity and opportunity, national security, and democracy. The imminent takeover by Asia, now reimagined to include the Middle East, remains strong in the psyche of Americans as both an international and a domestic threat (Kawai, 2005). From its earliest representations in the form of Persians and Mongol hordes, through the world wars and Cold War anxiety about Chinese and Japanese, to late twentieth-century anxiety about the globalization marketplace, to the post-9/11 distrust of anything that seems connected to the Middle East, to the most recent example (as of this writing) of anxiety over the dangers of globalization represented by lead found in the paint of inexpensive toys (blamed primarily on
Chinese subcontractors versus the companies hiring subcontractors and versus those responsible for inspecting imported toys), today's media culture remains rife with yellow peril discourse.

**Controlling the Yellow Peril**

Despite much vaunted talk of the United States being a "post-racist" society, this chapter suggests that yellow peril discourse has not ended and continues in contemporary media. By using Hall's understanding of representation and externalization, we can see how this discourse plays a role in the development of a dominant conceptual map of Asians and Asian Americans. As we can see through this relatively brief overview of different moments in US history, the demonization of Asians and Asian Americans as threats to the nation and to whiteness is persistent and continual. Part of the reason yellow peril remains a theme within media discourse is because of the historical and continuing unequal relations of media power, with dominant white society controlling the means of representation. Quite simply, Asians and Asian Americans have been unable to depict and represent themselves in the dominant mainstream US media, and therefore they have been depicted without much information, knowledge, or education about who they are. Since it is acknowledged that these images have had little informed content, then it becomes much easier to begin to talk about such issues as: Why would non-Asian Americans want to represent Asians and Asian Americans in the first place? Why do non-Asian Americans represent Asians and Asian Americans in a particular way? And, what struggles do those who want to try to produce images of Asian Americans with strong consciousness about Asian Americans and Asian American experiences face?

To help answer these questions, and to structure our discussion of Asian Americans in the media and of yellow peril media discourse, we recall Hall's conception and understanding of representation. Because so few Asian Americans were historically involved in externalizing images of themselves and other Asians and Asian Americans, the primary externalizations - public images, discourse, language, and signs - were created by non-Asian Americans, few of whom had any useful knowledge of Asians and Asian Americans and Asian and Asian American communities. Thus, yellow peril imagery was not a result of how Asian Americans understood their own presence in the Americas but, rather, an externalization of the dominant society's values of and attitudes and beliefs about them. Were Asians and Asian Americans to have more control over media institutions and media production, perhaps yellow peril themes would not be accessed so easily as ways to make sense of immigration, international relations, economic downturns, the auto industry, political campaigns, the sale of baseball teams, and the like.

Based on this theory of representation, we argue that yellow peril was a manufactured, not an "actual," threat to the power and stability of the United States as a nation-state. One might counter that, for example, Japan posed a "real" threat to the United States after Pearl Harbor, but the construction of yellow peril as a discourse did not match any real threat Japan posed. Thus, yellow peril as a discourse is primarily rhetorical; it shifts the public understanding and discussion of Asians and Asian Americans as a yellow peril whether or not it, or indeed any peril, exists. For instance, while no Japanese American was ever found guilty of treason, espionage, or spying, rumors and even official records at the time "imagined" Japanese Americans were Japan's "fifth column" and were attempting to help the enemy Japanese plan a mainland attack. Moreover, during World War II yellow peril was a racial construction; Japan did not characterize the United States in racial terms, but the United States constructed the Japanese not only as enemies, but also as racial enemies (Wong, 1978, 167-8). These racialized representations of yellow peril, then, helped rationalize the imprisonment of 120,000 Japanese Americans in concentration camps from 1942 to 1945.

As is evident in the case of Vincent Chin, as well as in many other cases we describe, international relations with Asian countries have a direct relationship with how Asians and Asian Americans are understood domestically. Furthermore, a reservoir of imagery, a conceptual map described by Edward Said as Orientalism, already exists about Asians that relates to media representation globally. In his book Orientalism (1978), Said describes the historical significance of the power and control of Western intellectuals, as well as Western culture more broadly, to conceive of the East as different from the West. Said suggests that Asian people did not create Orientalism, and that Orientalism does not describe Asian people. Oriental studies sought to characterize the East as a conception by the West, without input by the East. Thus, Orientalism was a European invention of what white Europeans believed about Asians, a European externalization, hence a fictionalized view of the world. Orientalism helped explain how Asian people and civilization related to European people and civilization. In a sense, from within the Western framework, it helped put the East in its place and defined more clearly what was East and what was West. Once the place for people in the East was defined, an investment in a relationship of power between East and West was reproduced.

To clarify the relationship between East and West, the West was constructed as in power and the East was constructed as needing the power of the West, because people in the East are unable to govern...
themselves. Thus, "A line is drawn between two continents. Europe is powerful and articulate; Asia is defeated and distant" (Said, 1978, 57). Additionally, Said suggests that Oriental studies then characterized their own projections of what the East was as having been arrived at objectively, thus positioning Western knowledge of the East as objective and any other understandings, such as non-academic, or non-Western, and certainly non-rational, understandings as illegitimate. Said's concept of Orientalism, then, helps us not only to understand the existence and logic of yellow peril discourse, but also to see how it is transnational, reproducing a relationship between the West and East and therefore defining Asians and Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners and as ever-present threats to the nation.

Furthermore, these examples illustrate that yellow peril is a media discourse that refers abstractly to the threat of Asian takeover and therefore does not allow for distinctions among groups. Yellow peril discourse gives little attention or meaning to ethnic, cultural, political, historical, and social differences. In other words, yellow peril imagery ends up subscribing to the notion that "all Asians look alike," thus diminishing ethnic, cultural, religious, and other differences. As we have seen, while yellow peril imagery was perhaps most strongly used early on in relation to Chinese and Chinese Americans, it has throughout US history repeatedly appeared as a way to make all Asians and Asian Americans the "other" and the enemy/foe - as in the case of Vincent Chin, for example.

Our approach to studying yellow peril discourse in this chapter has been to take an Asian American studies perspective on the subject; to draw attention to the historical, social, political, and legal conditions that relate to its existence; to emphasize the multimedia dimension of the emergence of yellow peril; and to suggest the ability ultimately to change media representations through knowledge, study, and critical examination of such representations. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue in Unthinking Eurocentrism (1994), the act of criticism itself is part of the process of dismantling systems of domination. Through critique, the possibilities for change become imaginable.

The use of yellowface, the topic of this chapter, is, like the use of yellow peril discourse, heavily dependent on the historical treatment of Asians and Asian Americans. The practice of white actors playing Asian and Asian American characters, especially in early twentieth-century Hollywood, has received at least some scholarly attention. In part because of racism and specific racist and xenophobic policies against miscegenation, Asian and Asian American actors could not even play genuine character parts in early media culture. Asians and Asian Americans were not ordinarily given jobs in Hollywood, and Asian and Asian American characters were scarce. When such characters did exist, a convention of yellowface ensured that they were played primarily by whites. In the 1960s, when codes and laws against miscegenation were relaxed, and when the Hollywood production code prohibiting depictions of miscegenation weakened and was ultimately replaced by a ratings system, one might assume that yellowface practices would die a natural and logical death. And it is true that at least some more Asian and Asian American actors did find work in Hollywood in the 1960s. However, as we argue in this chapter, explicit yellowface continued, as when David Carradine landed the lead role of Kwai Chang Caine in the television show Kung Fu, and techniques went beyond the explicit to include implicit yellowface strategies that, while retreating from more explicit representations, preserved yellowface logics.

Thus, explicit yellowface impersonation is part of a much broader field of media representational practice that controls and often excludes Asian and Asian American self-representation. This raises a very important question: Why would Hollywood and those regulating the movie industry not want Asians and Asian Americans writing stories about or playing roles of Asians and Asian Americans? Yellowface logics, which buttress the production of both explicit and implicit yellowface strategies, help support and maintain a condition of unequal power relations between whites and Asians and Asian Americans. Whereas whites, blacks, and others have played Asian