

Curriculum Project: Exploring Chinese Representation in Hollywood Cinema

By Kimberly Szeto

Here's a detailed three-day lesson plan for exploring the representation of Chinese and Chinese American lives in Hollywood, inspired by Arthur Dong's *Hollywood Chinese* documentary and book. This unit will address the history of racism and misrepresentation in American cinema while highlighting the contributions of Chinese American artists.

Lesson Plan: Exploring Chinese Representation in Hollywood Cinema

1. Rationale for the Proposed Unit

Course Context: This unit fits into a high school World History or U.S. History course, focusing on 20th-century American history, media studies, or cultural representation. Students will build on their understanding of racial and cultural histories to explore how media reflects and shapes societal attitudes.

Prior Knowledge: Students will have basic knowledge of American history, including key events of the 20th century, and general concepts of racial and cultural representation. They will be ready to tackle specific case studies of Chinese and Chinese American representation in film.

Skills and Content: Students will develop skills in critical media analysis, historical research, and comparative cultural studies. Content will include the evolution of Chinese representation in Hollywood, the impact of stereotypes, and the contributions of Chinese American artists.

2. Skill and Content Objectives

California State Standards:

- **History-Social Science Standard:** 11.7.2 - Analyze the impact of significant individuals and groups on the development of American culture.
- **Language Arts Standard:** 11.RI.2.5 - Analyze how authors use literary techniques and the media to influence the audience.
- **NCHS World History Standards:** Era 9 - The 20th Century Since 1945: "Analyze the role of popular culture in shaping and reflecting societal values."

Objectives:

1. Analyze how Chinese and Chinese American characters are portrayed in early Hollywood films.
2. Evaluate the impact of stereotypes and misrepresentation in American cinema.
3. Investigate the contributions of key Chinese American figures in the film industry.
4. Develop critical thinking skills through media analysis and historical comparison.

3. Detailed Lesson Plan

Day 1: Introduction to Chinese Representation in Hollywood

Lesson Objectives:

- Introduce students to the historical context of Chinese representation in American cinema.
- Discuss key concepts such as stereotypes, yellowface, and the contributions of Chinese American artists.

Activities:

1. Introduction Lecture (30 minutes):

- **Content:** Overview of the history of Chinese representation in Hollywood, focusing on stereotypes and key figures like Anna May Wong and James Wong Howe.
- **Materials:** PowerPoint slides with historical images, clips from *Hollywood Chinese*, and brief biographies of key figures.
- **Discussion Questions:**
 - How have Chinese characters been portrayed in early American films?
 - What are some examples of stereotypes and how do they affect perceptions of Chinese Americans?

2. Film Clip Analysis (30 minutes):

- **Content:** Watch and analyze clips from early Hollywood films such as *The Curse of Quon Gwon* (1917) and *The Good Earth* (1937).
- **Materials:** Selected film clips, guided viewing worksheet.
- **Guided Questions:**
 - What stereotypes do you see in these clips?
 - How are Chinese characters depicted in these films?

Homework:

- Read a short article on early Chinese American cinema and complete a reading reflection focusing on how these films shaped public perception.

Day 2: Deep Dive into Stereotypes and Contributions

Lesson Objectives:

- Examine specific examples of racist stereotypes and explore the achievements of Chinese American artists.

Activities:

1. Stereotype Analysis Activity (30 minutes):

- **Content:** Analyze films for examples of yellowface and other stereotypes. Compare these with real historical contexts.
- **Materials:** Film clips from *Charlie Chan in Honolulu* (1938) and *The Sand Pebbles* (1966), stereotype analysis worksheet.

- **Guided Questions:**
 - What are the main stereotypes in these clips?
 - How do these portrayals compare with the real experiences of Chinese Americans?
- 2. Artist Contributions Presentation (30 minutes):**
- **Content:** Present the achievements of Chinese American figures like Anna May Wong, Nancy Kwan, and Ang Lee.
 - **Materials:** Presentation slides, short clips of their work.
 - **Activities:** Group presentations or a jigsaw activity where groups research and present on different figures.
 - **Guided Questions:**
 - How did these individuals challenge stereotypes?
 - What contributions did they make to the film industry?

Homework:

- Research a Chinese American filmmaker or actor not covered in class and write a brief report on their contributions and impact.

Day 3: Analyzing Modern Films and Reflection

Lesson Objectives:

- Compare historical representations with contemporary portrayals of Chinese Americans.
- Reflect on the impact of these portrayals on society and personal perspectives.

Activities:

- 1. Modern vs. Historical Comparison (30 minutes):**
- **Content:** Compare historical films with contemporary films like *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018).
 - **Materials:** Clips from *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), comparison chart.
 - **Guided Questions:**
 - How do modern films address or avoid past stereotypes?
 - What progress can you see in the representation of Chinese Americans in recent films?
- 2. Class Discussion and Reflection (30 minutes):**
- **Content:** Discuss the impact of film representations on societal attitudes and personal views.
 - **Materials:** Discussion prompts and reflection questions.
 - **Guided Questions:**
 - How do films reflect and influence cultural attitudes?
 - What can we learn from the historical and modern representations of Chinese Americans?

Homework:

- Write a reflective essay on what you learned about the representation of Chinese Americans in Hollywood and how it affects your understanding of cultural identity and history.
-

4. A Plan for Assessing Student Achievement

Culminating Activities:

1. **Film Analysis Essay:** Students write an essay analyzing stereotypes in early Hollywood films and comparing them with modern representations.
 - **Criteria:** Understanding of stereotypes, ability to compare historical and modern films, critical thinking about cultural impact.
 2. **Research Report:** Students research a Chinese American artist and present their contributions to the film industry.
 - **Criteria:** Depth of research, clarity of presentation, ability to connect contributions to broader historical and cultural contexts.
 3. **Reflective Essay:** Students write about their personal reflections on how film representations shape cultural perceptions.
 - **Criteria:** Insightfulness of reflection, connection to historical and modern contexts, personal engagement with the material.
-

5. Personal Reflection/Testimonials

Reflection:

The seminar has deepened my understanding of the complex history of Chinese representation in Hollywood and highlighted the need for more nuanced and inclusive portrayals in media. I have gained new strategies for teaching about race, representation, and cultural contributions, which will enrich my students' learning experiences. The focus on both historical misrepresentations and contemporary advancements will help students see the ongoing relevance of these issues in media and society.

Extracurricular Extensions:

- **Film Club:** Organize a film club to explore more films about diverse cultures and discuss their historical and cultural significance.
 - **Guest Speakers:** Invite local Chinese American filmmakers or historians for talks and Q&A sessions.
-

References

- Dong, Arthur. *Hollywood Chinese: The Chinese in American Feature Films*. University of California Press, 2008.
 - *Hollywood Chinese* Documentary, directed by Arthur Dong.
 - California State Standards for History-Social Science and Language Arts.
 - "The History of Chinese Representation in American Cinema." *History Today*, accessed March 2024.
-

This lesson plan provides a structured approach to exploring the representation of Chinese Americans in Hollywood, offering students opportunities for critical analysis, historical research, and personal reflection.