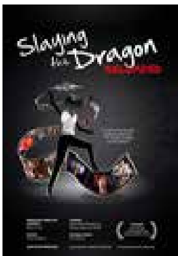

Deborah Gee, Director, *Slaying the Dragon*

Elaine H. Kim, Director, *Slaying the Dragon: Reloaded*

San Francisco: Asian Women United of California, 2011. 88 minutes, color. $89.00 (K-12, public libraries, and select groups); $395 (universities, colleges, and institutions).
http://www.asianwomenunited.org/

In 2011, Amy Chua's controversial memoir, *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mom*, brought about much discussion on her strict, disciplinarian parenting style. Chua, a law professor at Yale University, became an icon in the Chinese-speaking world and the inspiration for a Chinese TV drama in 2015 named after the term she coined. In mainstream America, however, "Tiger Mom" concretized the image of Asian women who rapidly ascend in the American social hierarchy with razor-sharp intention, borderline inhumane self-dedication in the process, and are ruthless to those who come in their way.

Slaying the Dragon: Reloaded, also produced in 2011, boasts on its DVD box the equally ferocious description of "[s]licing and dicing representations of Asian

women in the media." The 2-DVD set includes *Slaying the Dragon*, an earlier documentary that covers the images of Asian characters in American film up to 1988, and *Slaying the Dragon: Reloaded*, which updates the discussion with considerations of not only films, but also a wide range of public and social media through the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Slaying the Dragon starts the historical exploration of Asian stereotypes in American cinema from the roles played by Anna May Wong (1905–1961)—in the *Thief of Bagdad* (1924) as an exotic Mongolian princess and slave girl, in the *Shanghai Express* (1932) as a mysterious and villainous prostitute, and finally, as the iconic "Dragon Lady" in the *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931). As the interviews of Asian women actors would attest, the image of the Dragon Lady was so deeply rooted in the American filmmakers' collective memory that it became the foundational stereotype that these Asian actors had to work against for many decades after. The general acceptance of Caucasian American actors "yellowfacing" and taping their eyelids to play Asian characters also contributed to the discrimination against Asian actors in the film industry.

The evolution of Asian characters in American film is juxtaposed with the historical timeline of events within the United States and American military activities around the world. This is, by now, a familiar narrative in Asian American studies—that the stereotypical images of Asian and Asian Americans in the public imagination are directly correlated with the domestic and international politics of the time. First the Yellow Peril image goes hand-in-hand with Chinese exclusion of the late 1800s, followed by the Japanese as the villains during the Pacific War, and finally the Vietnamese and Chinese also take turns as the racialized protagonists.

The last segment of the analysis in *Slaying the Dragon* deals with the newer stereotypes and challenges of the Asian American community of the 1980s. From the Chinatown mafia to Connie Cheung-style journalists, American mainstream cinema continues to struggle with its morphing yet still limiting perceptions of Asian ethnicity. On the other hand, the 1980s and 1990s also witnessed Asian American filmmakers and actors increasingly empowered to present their own portrayals of, as well as struggles with, Asian characters. The end of this 1988 documentary successfully highlights the complexity of contemporary Asian American identities on and off the TV and silver screens.

Slaying the Dragon: Reloaded updates the original documentary with the complexity of the digital era. Through the 1990s and beyond, racial representations come from not only traditional media—print, TV, and film—but also internet outlets and social media such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Besides continuing explorations and reflections of Asian American filmmakers and actors in cinema, digital media provide venues for any Asian American interested in portraying Asian American identities in their own bodies and voices. In this short recap, we discover that some of the age-old stereotypes, such as Asian women being more submissive and sexually desirable, or that Asian men are socially awkward and unromantic, have persisted. However, the globalization of our shared racial discourse has been greatly enriched in this current time frame, especially after Latinos, Pacific Islanders, Middle Easterners, and other ethnic minorities also joined the previously White vs. Black racial dichotomy.

Although *Reloaded* is meant to be a sequel to *Slaying the Dragon*, it is more of a chronological update from the 1988 original than a stylistic continuation. The pacing in the two productions is drastically different. *Slaying the Dragon* has a much slower pace, and steadily establishes the transformations of Asian gender stereotypes through film clips and personal interviews. The interviews represent a wide range of perspectives, some of them honest about the struggles in evolving American racial politics, others more confessional in recalling personal choices made that may or may not have been beneficial for racial presentations on public media, still others voicing perspectives that are blatantly politically incorrect by today's standards. It is this rich range of sincere personal reflections, with little prior academic framing or concerns for political correctness, that makes the 1988 production a precious record of Asian American representations and self-representations in earlier eras. The few academic voices are not overpowering among the other community voices, and they provide a larger context and speculation for viewers to further ponder. Designed for a general audience—it was aired as part of the programming of KQED, the public TV broadcasting for northern California—*Slaying the Dragon* requires no former knowledge from the viewer, only an open mind.

On the other hand, *Reloaded* is fast-paced, compact, and requires familiarity within the academic discourse on ethnic representations in America. Some references on tangential discourses are left unexplained. For instance, there is a segment on representation of Muslims in public media without a clearly established connection to the overarching narrative on Asian American stereotypes ("The New Enemy"). With some grounding in the academic discourse on the process of Othering and knowledge of current world events, an informed viewer could possibly establish the association between the Muslims as the new public enemy of America and Asians as the previous version of the national threat. Explicitly making the connections would be very helpful for viewers who are not familiar with the genre of postcolonial critiques. Another significant but unarticulated update of *Reloaded* is the broadened inclusiveness of "Asian American" as an ethnic category. Whereas *Slaying the Dragon* focuses exclusively on East Asian American representations and perspectives, *Reloaded* additionally showcases South Asian American characters in movies, reality TV shows, and on the internet. This inclusiveness is an important aspect of the transformation of Asian American representations in American mainstream culture, and should be more definitively addressed.

To be fair, the density of *Reloaded* is evidence of the rapid advancement of Asian American Studies as an academic discipline in the last twenty-five years. Even as some older Asian stereotypes still linger in the collective consciousness of the American public, tireless activism toward racial justice has created a narrative of empowerment in the Asian American community. As Asian Americans continue participating in the complex racial politics of the U.S., we witness increasing diversity, as well as the empowerment to embrace that diversity, in Asian American self-representations. The difference between the Dragon Lady of 1931 and the Tiger Mom of 2011 lies in the level of ownership in creating these labels—the Dragon Lady was written into a public fantasy; Amy Chua told her own story. The shared

linear negativity of these stereotypes, however, indicates that much of mainstream America still has a long way to go before truly embracing Asian Americans as full, living, self-determining, yet integrated members of American society.

As an instructor of general education courses, I can imagine using *Slaying the Dragon* as introductory material for lower division students, not only for discussions on Asian American stereotypes, but also for considerations of general racial narratives in the United States. *Reloaded*, in turn, would be excellent for students to reflect upon after being exposed to core scholarly narratives for considering race and ethnic relations.

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