

East Goes West - Chinese Filmmakers in the United States

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“Hollywood and the Strange Case of the Korean Ethno-Masquerade: Koreans as Substitute Chinese and Perpetual Japanese”

The unprecedented international success of *hallyu* [the Korean cultural wave] to become a new global vernacular has Hollywood intrigued as to how it can capitalize on this new cultural force without diminishing its own hegemonic position over global popular culture. Oddly enough, when South Korean actors and Korean characters are invited to participate in Hollywood’s dream factory, they do so by surrendering their South Korean dreams to become one of Hollywood’s two Asian ethnic others in an on-going ethno-masquerade: as substitute Chinese and as perpetual Japanese.

With Chinese state censors insistent that Chinese characters be depicted in a positive light, any Hollywood film that wants a chance to gain economic success in China has to either begin as a co-production or create a narrative that will not offend the Chinese. So if a completed film has as its chief antagonists the Chinese as was the case with the 2012 remake of *Red Dawn*, then they are reformulated to become North Koreans. Under President George W. Bush’s “Axis of Evil” pronouncement on January 29, 2002, North Korea joined Iran and Iraq to create the new triumvirate. America invaded Iraq, is negotiating a nuclear deal with Iran, and is still technically at war with North Korea since it only signed a ceasefire agreement to suspend rather than end the Korean War (1950-3). So rather than Middle Eastern terrorists, it is a rouge North Korean splinter special operations unit that attacks the White House to create narrative plausibility in *Olympus Has Fallen* (2013). In Hollywood, violent films featuring the justifiable killing of its enemies favor Nazis in WWII films and Middle Eastern terrorists in the post 9/11 world. To add a third spice, North Koreans provide a reprieve to Hollywood’s narrative predictability in its current action genre formulation. Yet, South Korea, America’s long-standing ally, remains diegetically absent.

When it comes to South Korean male actors making their Hollywood debut, they do so as Japanese characters. Rain in *Ninja Assassin* (2009), and Byung-hun Lee in *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra* (2009) and *G.I. Joe: Retaliation* (2013). Under this scenario, South Koreans are presented as perpetual second-class citizens of the Japanese Empire, which ruled Korea as a colony from 1910-1945, whose Korean identity is eviscerated to become Japanese. In effect, Japan’s formal government policy to eradicate Korean culture and turn all Koreans into Japanese failed historically but succeeds in Hollywood.

Hollywood’s positioning of Koreans as its current favorite object du jour to enact its praxis of the ethno-masquerade reveals a deep-seated racist logic of demonizing not just its other but also its ally. This logic takes on troubling dimensions with Byung-

Jun Lee given the role of the morphing T-1000 in the forthcoming *Terminator Genysis* (2015), the fifth cinematic rendition in *The Terminator* franchise.