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Hye Seung Chung, **Hollywood Asian: Philip Ahn and the Politics of Cross-Ethnic Performance,** Temple University Press, 2006, 248 pp, $22.95 (paperback).

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Amongst the notable Asian American actors of Hollywood's first half-century – Anna May Wong and Keye Luke for example - Philip Ahn is one of the least known despite being one of the most fascinating figures within that small but significant community. One of the only Korean American actors working alongside – and often playing - Chinese and Japanese/Americans, Ahn was also the son of celebrated Korean independence leader Tosan An Ch'ang-ho. Scholars consider Ahn and his siblings as the first Americans of Korean ancestry born in the United States, and between his family's fame and Ahn's chosen profession, he became one of the few visible, literal faces of the Korean diaspora in either the U.S. or abroad in the first half of the 20th century. Yet, despite a career that spanned over 40 years and 200 parts in film and television, Ahn barely merits a footnote (if that) in either conventional Hollywood histories or even the emerging canon of Asian American film studies. This is the vacuum that Hye Seung Chung's new "critical discursive biography" of Ahn, *Hollywood Asian,* attempts to fill.

Chung's study of Ahn comes at a time where there has been a slow but steady effort to revisit the careers of other early Asian American film stars and film workers. Among the recipients of this new focus are Sessue Hayakawa, the Japanese American lead actor of the silent film era, and James Wong Howe, the Oscar-winning, Chinese American cinematographer active from the '30s through the '70s. However, the most celebrated icon has been Ahn's childhood friend, Anna May Wong. Once criticized for playing, if not pioneering, the "dragon lady" archetype, this Chinese American actor of the silent film and sound eras has since seen her reputation recuperated by critics and scholars who now celebrate her as a trailblazing force for racial, gender and sexual subversion within early Hollywood.

Chung doesn't explicitly explain why Ahn has not enjoyed the same attention, though she does suggest that previous "studies tend to privilege two ethnicities, Chinese and Japanese, while unintentionally marginalizing other groups." She is perhaps being too diplomatic here – Ahn's absence from such foundational studies of Asian American film such as the UCLA Asian American Studies Center and Visual Communications' anthology *Moving The Image* (1992), Jun Xing's historical survey *Asian America Through the Lens*, Darrell Hamamoto and Sandra Liu's *Countervisions* (2000) collection or Peter Feng's edited anthology *Screening Asian Americans* (2002) becomes all the more glaring as the scope and importance of his career comes into more relief.

This may reflect the nascence of the field but it may also be because "Ahn's political positioning is contradictory and precarious" (186) as Chung notes. Many of his characters undoubtedly contributed to a legacy of racist images in Hollywood and Ahn's own repudiation that racism affected his own life would not have endeared him to many media activists either. Nonetheless, Ahn's career was far more complex and nuanced than a simple image-analysis might reveal.

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For example, the first chapters in Chung's book are devoted to one of the most striking aspects of Ahn's career: his decision to play Japanese "heavies" during the WWII era. These characters, dripping in almost cartoonish villainy and treachery, can be seen as part of the anti-Japanese propaganda machine of the war effort, but for Ahn they also served a more personal and political purpose as a Korean American: to help sway public sentiment against the colonialists occupying his ancestral country. Chung includes this remarkable quote from a 1978 television interview with Ahn: "Being of Korean ancestry … I had tremendous, shall we say, hatred for the Japanese … So when I get a Japanese role that calls for me to be vicious … I played it to the hilt. I had fun doing it."

One example that Chung highlights was in *They Met in Bombay* (1941) where Ahn is cast as a Japanese military officer During one scene, where Ahn's character is supposed to be speaking in Japanese, Ahn surreptitiously changed the dialogue to Korean instead, with remarks described as "highly uncomplimentary to the Japanese." Film's producers had no idea what Ahn had done until well after it had been distributed internationally and Japanese complaints got the entire scene excised from any existing prints.

As these roles suggest, Ahn wore a double mask as an actor – one as a Korean passing for Japanese, but more importantly, he deployed racial stereotype in the furtherance of an anti-colonialist campaign. That Ahn was the scion of a national liberation hero, using his profession to further his martyred father's work only accentuates how powerful a political medium popular culture could be. Moreover, Ahn complicates the conventional, anti-racist critique of Hollywood images. Certainly, from an Asian American perspective, Ahn's Japanese characters could be read as racist caricature. However, as an anti-imperialist tool, Ahn's subversive acting is harder to problematize, serving as an important reminder that the politics of representation are highly dependent on context.

In exploring these rich contours to Ahn's career, Chung makes a deliberate choice to avoid writing a conventional biography, settling instead on what she describes as a "critical discursive biography" rather than a conventional biography and her approach offers up both distinct advantages and a few liabilities. Because Chung convincingly positions Ahn as "a decentered, poststructuralist subject," she's able to situate his career vis-a-vis a series of different case studies and close readings.

For example, her third chapter looks at the "Oriental detective movies" of the 1930s through 1950s, most famously exemplified by the long- running Charlie Chan series that gave rise to a series of similarly themed B-movies. Chung focuses on two films in particular, *Daughter of Shanghai* (1937) and *King of Chinatown* (1939), made remarkable by how Ahn and Anna May Wong were cast as the romantic leads in both, a rarity both then and today.

Chung's knowledge as a film scholar is clearly evident in her ability to discuss the Oriental detective genre as a whole but she also offers convincing close readings of each of those two respective films. Through that intimate analysis, Chung adroitly weaves together discussions of Ahn's ambiguous sexuality, his "cross-ethnic masquerade" and its potential effect on Asian/American viewers, and the larger social-historical anxieties in which these film's narratives play off.

However, besides the biographical sketch of Ahn himself, a central focus of *Hollywood Asian*, is a tour of the convoluted route the American film/television industry took in "recognizing" Korea as a distinct nation-state and Korean Americans as an ethnic category. In that process, Chung crafts a compelling exploration of how the cinematic representation of Korea and its people became a palimpsest for American domestic and foreign anxieties.

This manifests most obviously with the genre of Korean War films that, unlike the orgy of jingoism inspired by World War II, were far darker and more conflicted, reflecting the divisive opinions about the war itself. Chung's discussion of director Samuel Fuller's Korean War films could apply to the genre writ large:

> "The Korean War and its strain on the male psyche are constantly displaced onto something *other* or at least something politically adjacent: World War II, the French-Vietnam War, Cold War paranoia, interracial conflicts and bonding, and madness and pathology."

Shadowing all this is Ahn himself, appearing as a North Korean POW in *Battle Circus* (1953), an interpreter for the U.S. military in a television episode of *TV Reader's Digest* (1955) and the head of Korean family in a 1976 episode of the long-running *M*A*S*H* series. To be sure, most of his roles were minor but what's notable is how fluidly Ahn moves between contradictory characters – friend one moment, foe the other. Within this era of Ahn's career, Chung sees reflected America's own ambivalent, confused relationship to Korea.

Though these specific, thematic readings are amongst Chung's great strengths as a scholar, they also have an unintended, ironic consequence of detracting from a more accessible portrait of Ahn himself. Perhaps the fracturing of Ahn's biography is precisely the point, insofar as it reflects the uneven and disparate relationship that Hollywood has had with representations of Asia/Asians, to say the least of Korea/Koreans. However, what makes the book so compelling, at its heart, is the figure of Ahn himself. His mercurial career does not simply illuminate the analysis Chung brings to bear on issues such as race, transnationalism and popular cinema – they also serve to personalize and dramatize them.

Yet by the end of the book, he too becomes a minor player of sorts in Chung's case studies – ever present, but nudged to the edge of the frame at times. This would not be as awkward if not for the lack of a more complete description of Ahn's career and life on the front end. While respecting Chung's decision to avoid writing a conventional biography, her book may have benefited from a longer introductory chapter that more thoroughly framed Ahn's life story before moving onto the stand-alone case studies. Instead, his career highlights, while a constant presence, become jumbled and the reader, at times, is left wanting for a more consistent and comprehensive narrative to absorb.

But none of this detracts from the importance of Chung's book. Especially given the promotion of transnational scholarship within American and Asian American studies, the exemplary depth and nuance to *Hollywood Asian*'s analysis highlights the complex but intimate ways that America's cultural imagination is tied into international relations and tensions. The idea isn't new of course, but Chung's work sheds light on

the role played by Korea and Korean Americans within the Hollywood mythmaking system, topics that have received little attention in either studies of mainstream Hollywood or Asian American cinema scholarship.

Equally important, *Hollywood Asian* finally brings into better focus one of the most intriguing and unique Asian American figures within the film industry. Though much of his career has gone unnoted by other writers and scholars, it seems only appropriate that Philip Ahn would become – after Anna May Wong – one of the first of the early Asian American actors to earn a book-length biographical study. Though his career may have been built mostly on bit parts, the panoply of literal and symbolic faces Ahn displayed through his roles justify the close-up this book delivers.