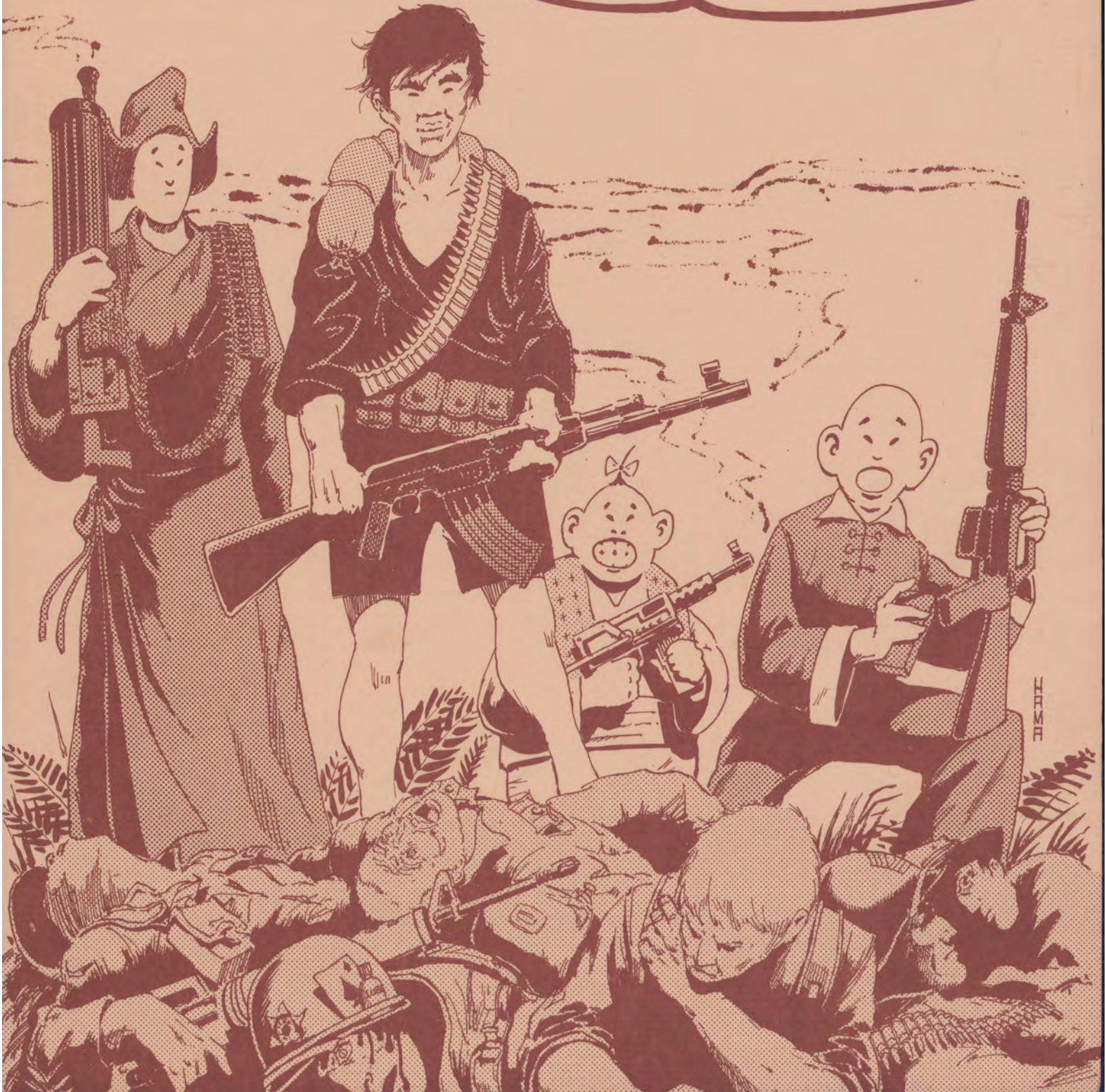


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RACISM IN THE COMICS  
THE TRIAL OF TOKYO ROSE  
CHINATOWN'S GAMBLING HOUSE.





# MEDIA

## Racism in the Comics

by Michio Kaku

*Ever hear of racism chic? It used to be hip to be radical chic. You know: Right On. Power to the People. Off the Pig. Then it was porno chic. Deep Throat. Linda Lovelace. Gay Lib. Well, now its racism chic. Kung Fu. Fu Manchu. Charlie Chan.*

With the increased economic competition from Japan, the recent entry of China into open international politics, and the latest U.S. military defeats in Vietnam and Cambodia, the U.S. media can be expected to use increasingly vicious stereotypes directed against Asian people. Once again, the news media are whipping up Asian stereotypes in increasing numbers, a little reminiscent of the war hysteria that led to the incarceration of 110,000 Japanese-Americans during World War II.

In the last issue of *Bridge*, the Asian Americans for a Fair Media explained how it fights this racism in the media by first singling out specific, offensive ads, magazine articles and radio and TV stations that use stereotypes to demean the dignity of Asian people, and then by launching a campaign to marshall public opinion against the offender. But though much has been said about racism in the established media, racism in comic books, while more blatant and less sophisticated, remains largely

uncharted territory. Since the average comic may easily sell 200,000 copies per month, and because there are around 100 titles, we are talking about the neighborhood of several million copies per month, a figure which clearly surpasses the circulation of most popular magazines.

Comics provide us with a rich cultural heritage and have left an indelible mark on the American psyche. Some say that comics are a mirror to our collective unconscious. If so, then the American unconscious has progressed little beyond Chop Suey and Fu Manchu. Comics represent a flight into fantasy, a world where one word...Shazam!...can transform a 96-pound Billy Batson into a hulking Captain Marvel, and where the bite of a radioactive spider can turn puny science majors into a web-slinging Spiderman. But comics are also a world where diabolical Asians sadistically drool over white women and are obsessed with conquering the world. Behind every Green Lantern, who uses his power beam to battle heroically for justice and goodness, there hides a Pie Face, whose only function is to polish the lantern. How could Dr. Strange soar into his ectoplasmic form if there wasn't a faithful Wong to tend after his mortal body?

Asian stereotypes fall into several easily definable categories:

### **The Fu Manchu Syndrome**

Fu Manchu, the greatest of all Asian stereotypes, was born

during the early days of the cheap thrill magazines, the pulps, and lives in the subconscious mind of every American child. The pulps of the thirties were the forerunners of all comics; fantastic pulp characters like Doc Savage and the Bat were the prototypes for Superman and Batman. Playing on the anxieties of young boys in puberty, the pulps created a fantasy world where the macabre image of Fu Manchu challenged the sanity of white men and the virginity of white women. With razor-sharp fingernails, flowing robes, sinister eyes, and a drooping, needle-like mustache, Fu Manchu was the arch-villain whose lust was only exceeded by his sadism.

Buck Rogers, the first and perhaps most successful of the science-fiction strips of the thirties, combined the image of Fu Manchu with the menacing Asian hordes to paint a dismal picture of the 25th Century, a war-ravaged land where barbarous Mongol hordes have driven the white race to near extinction. In his very first adventure, Buck Rogers rescues his girl friend from the avaricious clutches of the Mongol king and becomes a champion of the beleaguered white race.

And later, in the greatest of all movie serials and comic strips, Flash Gordon rockets to the planet Mongo to save the earth from the insidious designs of Ming the Merciless. Like the Fu Manchu who was played by Boris Karloff, Ming the Merciless, as portrayed by Charles Middleton, was the personification of evil.

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Ming the Merciless, much like the Mongol king before him, finds time to lust after Dale Arden, Flash Gordon's female companion, while busily conquering the

universe. And later, the Batman serial of the forties finds the Caped Crusader in a life and death struggle with a Japanese spy (played by a guy named Nash, who also did some movies under the title of Charlie Chan). In one typical episode, there is a tunnel of love where the wax figures depict a white woman lying prostrate before ogling Japanese soldiers.

The legacy of Ming the Merciless and the Mongol hordes have provided fertile material for comic book writers of today. Virtually all superheroes pay homage to the Fu Manchu mystique. Most recently, we find Batman, Iron Man, and Nick Fury, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. locked in mortal combat with the descendants of Fu Manchu. Iron Man deserves some special attention, being the only superhero to consistently battle communism and the only superhero to have his origin in the Vietnam War. Perhaps it is only natural that Iron Man, whose alter ego is Tony Stark, famed lady killer and munitions magnate who makes his living peddling Cold War weaponry to Congress, should do battle with the Mandarin (a mad Oriental genius with hideous rings of destruction

on each finger) and with the Titanium Man (the Russian champion who later defects to the West).

### Kemosabi Syndrome

Remember Tonto? Trusty Indian scout for the Masked Man?

Well, since an Asian can never soar into the air in his own skin-tight underwear, the best he can do is offer comic relief. Easily the best known Asian sidekick in comicdom was Chop Chop, apprentice to the legendary blackhawks, a multinational paramilitary force. Bucktoothed, pigtailed, stunted, and pear shaped, Chop Chop would hurl himself into battle, flailing his butcher knife, endearing himself to the reader with memorable one-liners like "Me kill!" Far more than just a side-kick, like Kato of the Green Hornet, Chop Chop was given a definite, albeit retarded, personality and individually starred in some stories, though he was more often a victim than a hero in these vignettes.

Perhaps in response to public pressure, Chop Chop recently had his teeth fixed, had his hair styled, was fitted with elevator shoes, and







**Banzai Syndrome**

War comics provide the clearest example of how the media use racism to foster blind patriotism. Whether they are Germans, Japanese, or North Koreans, the enemy soldier is caricatured as cruel and deformed. The bespectacled, squinty-eyed, buck-toothed Japanese soldier is a

staple of most war comics. Because comic writers during World War II only knew two Japanese words, waves of Japanese soldiers are always jumping into live machine-gun fire yelling "Banzai!" or else committing hara-kiri at the slightest excuse.

Typical is the story of the G.I. who, armed only with a machine gun, is left behind to stop the onslaught of Japanese troops. The Asian hordes all perish by mindlessly running directly into his line of fire, thus reinforcing the belief that Asian lives are cheap. And in one forgettable story, Captain Marvel Jr. is injected in his mortal state by a serum that converts loyal Caucasians into mindless Japanese who instantly shout "Banzai." And sure enough, when he utters the magic words "Captain Marvel," he turns into a Japanese superhero loyal to the Emperor. (Captain Marvel Jr., being immortal, of course, merely faked the whole thing.)

Stories depicting the Vietnam War, however, were less successful. Perhaps because of the complexity and the absence of glamour in a people's war, initial attempts to capitalize on the Vietnam War were met with disappointing sales. As a result, war comics are continually reliving the glorious days of World War II. Either they are totally set in that time period, or they are engaged in titanic struggles with modern-day Nazi and Japanese left-overs of that period, like the Red Skull.

**Dragon Lady Syndrome**

If Asian men are portrayed as retarded, sadistic, or bucktoothed, then Asian women are slinky, exotic, with a penchant for white men. The Suzy Wong is the fulfillment of the dreams of every immature white male: sexy yet submissive, passionate yet obedient. The fantasy world of Steve Canyon and Terry and the Pirates, if it stopped here, would be offensive enough, but these two strips present a picture of Asia as a land of dark cruelty and dimly lit opium dens, where lives are cheap and expendable. Steve Canyon and Terry and the Pirates have a whole zoo filled with the lowest forms of Asian life. More seriously, the Dragon Ladies, hatchet men, and tong wars of Steve Canyon and Terry and the Pirates have done more to sell innocent Americans on the virtues of the Korean and Vietnam Wars than a hundred Pentagon generals. Cold War comics like Steve Canyon and Terry and the Pirates serve a definite function: to feed the public two-dimensional stereotypes of Asia that create a climate favorable to U.S. military intervention. Often, these strips are the only exposure that mid-Western Americans have to Asians, giving the Kansas boy the impression that volunteering for the Army will give him access to easy medals of glory and the bedrooms of easy Asian Suzy Wongs. More than any of the other comics, Steve Canyon and Terry and the Pirates have used racist stereotypes of Asians to foster an atmosphere which tolerates My





Lai's free fire zones, Christmas bombings, tiger cages, napalm, defoliation, and anti-personnel weapons.

### Racism for Profit

All the stereotypes mentioned above are obvious caricatures of Asians; it is unfortunate, however, that so much of American views on Asia are subtly influenced by these caricatures. Recently, however, the media have embarked upon a more ambitious, infinitely more sophisticated version of racism, i.e. racism as camp. Racism chic, supposedly, is immune from the usual objections because it is supposedly a parody of itself, because anything so outrageously in bad taste can't be all that bad.

In the name of camp, R. Crumb, a leader in the field of underground comics, depicts the most egregious Black and Asian stereotypes. In one episode of Fritz the Cat, for example, the Chinese people are represented as a pack of rats, bent on conquering this country by flooding it with millions of other rats. And in a recent issue of National Lampoon,



which seems to revel in bad taste, there is the story of Hitachi "Sparks" Mitsubishi. In one panel, one Japanese soldier says to another: "Hey Sparks, we're planning to torture this Red Cross nurse tonight! If you're not doing anything later, would you care to join us?" This National Lampoon story is indicative of a new trend in ethnic slander, a low-based humor that makes our trip to the concentration camps that much closer.

In summary, comics are a convenient vehicle by which the grossest stereotypes are expressed in the name of fantasy. Of course, comics are more than just a flight into a world of imagination; comics are big business, and, like all big businesses, subject to the demands of the market place. Comics are not run by kindly artists who have not quite outgrown their childhood; comics are run by businessmen interested in greater profits. Green Lantern, for example, won scores of artistic awards for its bold artwork and pioneering work in drugs, ecology and racism, but was canceled because it failed to produce adequate profits. Comics, then, are subjected to the same censorship and editorial strangulation as all other forms of media, and during times of economic crises, can be expected to resurrect racist stereotypes on demand. Behind the tinsel and brightly colored cover lie the cold economic pressures that use racism for fun and profit.

What can be done about this racism? Like all forms of media, comics are subject to public pressure. Recently, for example, comics have been reprinting stories from the 'Golden Age' of

comics (the forties) though they have so far resisted printing the more outrageously racist ones. The publishers have indicated that they are awaiting public reaction on whether to reprint these potentially offensive stories.

The Asian Americans for a Fair Media have been continually engaged in fighting all forms of racism in the media, but it needs help, your help. The racism in the comics and elsewhere can be stopped if several steps are taken:

(1) First clearly realize that comics are only pawns in a larger game, that the editorial policy of comics is largely under the control of big corporations and that during the times of crisis the comics can easily contribute to racist hysteria.

(2) Write letters to the publishers objecting to specific stereotypes. The Black movement, for example, has successfully eliminated the more offensive Black caricatures in comics.

(3) Convince others of the magnitude of anti-Asian racism now in the media. Put up bulletin boards of such material wherever Asian people congregate. Get telephone and letter-writing campaigns started among your friends.

(4) Send offensive ads to the Asian Americans for a Fair Media. Keep in contact with us in case we need to coordinate a campaign against specific ads, hiring practices, media programs, articles, etc.

Because we are short on money and manpower, we would appreciate it if you could send us contributions. Our address is Asian Americans for a Fair Media Manhattanville Post Office P. O. Box 1396 N.Y., N.Y. 10027