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Eastern influences become icons of popular culture

By Olivia Barker, USA TODAY

McDonald's tucks Hello Kitty toys into Happy Meals. Levi's uses karaoke to peddle jeans. Budweiser morphs "Whassup?!" into "wasabi" and makes a national buzz word out of a Japanese condiment. And Hollywood embraces a Chinese-language film. When *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* vies for 10 Oscars on Sunday, it won't only signal a milestone for the movie industry. (The film already has been anointed the highest-grossing foreign film ever in the USA.) Directed by Ang Lee, a Taiwanese-born New Yorker, *Crouching Tiger* also epitomizes a phenomenon that's been percolating for several years: the marriage of East and West, as Asian cultural forces increasingly influence, inform and inspire American cultural icons.



Even ubiquitous coffee-chain Starbucks has Asian-influenced offerings, including Tazo Chai Tea Latte.

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These days, it's not hard to imagine someone, freshly wakened from his futon and clad in a T-shirt emblazoned with Chinese calligraphy, ducking into a suburban Starbucks for a cup of chai before popping over to Blockbuster for Jet Li on DVD.

A few naysayers are quick to point out that this infatuation with all things Asian may be superficial and does not change the landscape for Asian-Americans, some of whom still feel outside the American mainstream. But other Asian-Americans regard the trend as largely

positive — and pervasive.

"There's a hunger for all things Asian," says Dina Gan, editor in chief of *A. Magazine*, the country's leading Asian-American publication. And the hunger isn't just for wasabi mashed potatoes and sashimi pizza. It's for biceps inked with Kanji tattoos and triceps toned by tai chi. For Noguchi lamps wrapped in rice paper and geta-style shoes teetering 3 inches above the ground.

In New York and other major cities, "Asia is so interwoven into the urban fabric, nothing really strikes me anymore," Gan says. Even in the smallest town, "there will always be a Chinese takeout place," she says. "It's pretty astounding."

And cultural critics say there's more melding to come. "This is just the opening of the door," says Bill Wong, who publishes Sunfire, an Asian-American news Web site (www.sunfiregroup.com).

A generation is coming of age at a time when the USA's major economic and political competitors are Japan and China, not the former Soviet Union. And today's kids who clamor for egg rolls in their lunch boxes, Seattle Mariners slugger Ichiro Suzuki at the ballpark and Pokémon on the playground are tomorrow's grown-ups who stretch through yoga, travel to Thailand and collect chinoiserie.

More colleges are creating Asian studies departments and more high schools are offering Japanese as the number of Asian students in American classrooms grows. The Asian population in the USA is close to 12 million, according to the 2000 Census — a number that's projected to nearly double by 2030.

"All these things had been burbling up culturally in the '90s," says *Town & Country's* design director, Sarah Medford, who traces the Eastern style evolution back eight years. A fascination with Zen Buddhism, the opening up of the Chinese trade market, the Hong Kong handover, the burgeoning Asian immigrant community — "it's all raised our consciousness of the richness of the Asian aesthetic."

And the East-West assimilation only seems to be gaining momentum. Jackie Chan is high-kicking his way onto WB as a cartoon and into Burger King as a toy. A handful of Asian films are opening this summer, including *The Road Home*, starring Zhang Ziyi of *Crouching Tiger* fame, and *Brother*, a gangster thriller from Japanese director Takeshi Kitano, shot in Los Angeles and featuring African-American actor Omar Epps.

Last fall's furniture shows in High Point, N.C., revealed the colors and shapes of homes to come, from rich reds to clean lines, all Asian inspired. "If something was made in China or Japan, you once thought, 'Yuck, it's cheap and I don't want it,'" says Carolyn Sollis, executive editor of *House Beautiful*. Now designers including Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein are "doing all sorts of collections" that pay homage to the East.

At restaurants, noodles are slurped up like spaghetti, and fajitas are rolled up with red bean paste. At parties, hosts are facing off in *Iron*

Chef-style cook-offs, eschewing tables and chairs in favor of pillows and floors and offering five-minute massages while guests sip cocktails.

"There is a yin and yang in the event industry between a very Asian influence and a more traditional, elegant influence," says David Adler, editorial director of BiZ Bash.com, a Web site for event planners.

Gan and her colleagues identified the Asian-American cultural blend trend in 1997 when they published *Eastern Standard Time*, a won-ton-soup-to-*Godzilla* catalog of Asia's influence on American tastes, from the dinner table to the movie theater. "It was definitely before its time," Gan says.

But it wasn't all Super Mario Bros. smiles. Back then, if you typed "Asian woman" into an Internet search engine, "all that popped up was porn," says Irene Shen. Exasperated, Shen founded an informational Web site, AsiangURLs.com, "to beat out" the X-rated pages. The smut is still in cyberspace, but so are odes to Michelle Yeoh, *Crouching Tiger's* flying warrior heroine, and Lucy Liu, Charlie's first Asian-American angel.

Shen is encouraged by the progress. "People aren't looking at me funny when I talk about feng shui anymore," Shen says. (For those still scratching their heads, that's the ancient Chinese art of environmental design, a philosophy that says our well-being depends on how our surroundings are arranged. It's now regularly used in home and office design, and even wedding planning.) "Acupuncture isn't so foreign a concept anymore. Ten years ago, it was like, 'What kind of hoodoo-voodoo is that?'"

The Asian influence "has always been there," says Stan Lim, managing director of *Yolk*, a magazine aimed at Asian-Americans, which sells T-shirts splashed with the quintessential Amerasian slogan "Got rice?" "It just hasn't been recognized" — until now.

Nonetheless, the relationship between East and West is more complex than origami. On one hand, Asian-Americans haven't forgotten British colonialism, Japanese-American internment and the propagation of myths like that of Suzie Wong. On the other, Asianization is still seen by many in the USA through the prism of "Orientalism." (Social critic Edward Said coined the term in his seminal 1979 book of the same name to describe the exotic, mysterious and ultimately racist labels historically applied to the East by the West.)

"In some ways, the old forces are still at work," Gan says: Asian-American actors must fake an accent and learn martial arts to be successful — they have to look and sound Asian, or America's stereotype of what is Asian. Stores still advertise "Oriental" rugs. "I see those signs and I cringe," she says. "It really bothers me."

Even the largely lauded *Crouching Tiger* has provoked tension: Does the film, custom-made for the West and roundly panned in the East, celebrate Asian culture or romanticize it?

"People come up to me and assume I must know karate." groans Ronald

Takaki, a professor of Asian-American studies at the University of California-Berkeley. "Most of us haven't studied the martial arts. It's not something we inherit."

Crouching Tiger and other Americanized representations of Asia aren't "so innocent," Takaki says. "They reinforce our identity as outsiders and strangers."

"There is this Orientalism in the air in American society," he adds. "We're stuck there."

The issue for many isn't so much whether Hollywood puts Asian faces on the screen but whether those depictions are three-dimensional. Glamorizing kung fu kicks and animé action — "we call this 'Asiaphilia,'" says Darrell Hamamoto, professor of Asian-American studies at UC-Davis. "It's all superficial and there's no depth to it."

And to Hamamoto, it's particularly pernicious when viewed against the decades-long history of anti-Asian bias in America, from the "model minority" myth to the vindication of Los Alamos scientist Wen Ho Lee after nine months in prison.

"Beneath this adoration of all things yellow, all things Asian, comes this condescension. In its most benign form, it's patronizing, and in its most severe form, it's a killer," Hamamoto says. Hamamoto, meanwhile, is hoping to invert the media power dynamic: He's involved in trying to launch a BET for Asian-Americans called YENTV, Yellow Entertainment Network Television.

But some say there are merits to what Madonna did two years ago, wrapping herself in kimono-like clothes, wearing her hair straight and black, and extolling the virtues of *Memoirs of a Geisha*, the best-selling novel by Tennessee-born Arthur Golden. Presenting even a slightly, or grossly, skewed version of Asian culture encourages mainstream interest. "I'd rather be on the radar screen than ignored," Wong says.

"It's great that these things are out there and acceptable," says Audrey Panichakoon Crone, co-founder of *Jade Magazine*, an online publication for Asian women. In fact, a friend who isn't Asian first took her partner, Ellen Hwang, to a Saint's Alp Teahouse in Manhattan, famous for its boba, the frothy Taiwanese tea drinks studded with tapioca pearls that are being sucked down on both coasts.

On the other hand, maybe these trendy, and sometimes inauthentic, interpretations of Asian culture "are the only things people see," Hwang says.

And there's a lot bubbling below. Eric Nakamura edits *Giant Robot*, a magazine dedicated to "cool aspects" of Asian and Asian-American pop culture. "If I went out and asked 10 random people 10 questions about things we cover in our magazine, they'd get maybe one out of 10 right," Nakamura says. Example: Who is Shonen Knife? Answer: An all-girl Japanese punk-pop band, lauded by Kurt Cobain and Sonic Youth alike. "Maybe one person would get that," he says.

Even in response to "What is *Crouching Tiger*?" Nakamura thinks only half would know. "People get the name wrong all the time: Crouching Man, Hidden Fist," he says. "You have to care to remember it."

But the movie's gravity-defying duel, thrashed atop bamboo branches, has proven more than memorable. To some critics, it symbolizes a paradigm shift.

In this month's *GQ*, Terrence Rafferty boldly likens the rise of Asian cinema to the British rock invasion of the 1960s. Asian films, particularly from Hong Kong directors such as John Woo and Tsui Hark, "seem more Hollywood than Hollywood," Rafferty says. "They've revived the old Hollywood values of star power. You're getting a lot of entertainment for your entertainment dollar at a time when Hollywood is seeming much more mechanical and much more packaged."

Beginning with the balletic moves of *The Matrix* — most Americans' introduction to the fantastic Hong Kong style of cinema — the Asian invasion on the silver screen "parallels the way the Beatles and the Rolling Stones gave back a little of the spirit of rock 'n' roll, through sheer enthusiasm," Rafferty says. He calls *Crouching Tiger* star Chow Yun Fat "one of the purest movie stars since Steve McQueen."

Yet Rafferty has some convincing to do. Chow and Yeoh didn't get Oscar nominations for their *Crouching Tiger* performances, an oversight that has rankled members of the Asian-American community. "It's kind of a concern for us," says *Yolk's* Lim, who notes that the Academy Awards also overlooked nominating the stars of 1987's *The Last Emperor*, which won best picture. "We're asking ourselves, 'Does Hollywood believe these films can be made without Asian actors?'"

Still, from *Sense and Sensibility* to *Crouching Tiger*, "the very fact that Ang Lee could succeed so well in the mainstream Hollywood industry is a step forward," says Xiao-huang Yin, who chairs the American studies department at Occidental College in Los Angeles. "Now, for many Asian-Americans, the question is, 'Can we continue the breakthrough?'"

