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CASTING FU MANCHU. By Eelyn Lee. Chinese Arts Now Digital Commission, Online.

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Eelyn Lee in *Casting Fu Manchu*. Photo: Eelyn Lee

Dr Fu Manchu, the archetypal supervillain invented by English Author Sax Rohmer in the 1910s and featured in countless Hollywood portrayals from the 1920s to the 2000s, has been described by scholars such as Ruth Mayer as the embodiment of Yellow Peril, an ideological construction of East Asia that William F. Wu regards as so pervasive within Western culture as to fundamentally shape both public perception and political policy.

Perhaps fittingly, Fu Manchu has not been portrayed in any major film production by a Chinese or East Asian performer. Instead, the character has been portrayed by white men engaging in makeup-assisted racial mimicry (a practice explored in David Henry Hwang's

2007 play *Yellow Face*). This fact formed the backdrop for Eelyn Lee's digital short, *Casting Fu Manchu*, for which Lee invited East and Southeast Asian performers to submit audition self-tapes of sides taken directly from classical Hollywood films featuring the character. These self-tapes, which featured prominently within the performance itself, created an opportunity for performers to subvert and reappropriate a character whose legacy can be seen as directly connected to the current resurgence in anti-Chinese sentiment.

Commissioned by Chinese Arts Now, a UK organisation that typically supports live theatre, music, and dance but responded to the pandemic with a series of digital commissions, *Casting Fu Manchu* took the form of an edited digital performance which reflected Lee's dual backgrounds in devised theatre and filmmaking. The work, which was streamed over Zoom, opened with a descent into subterranean catacombs as an anonymous voiceover detailed fears of violence and harassment amidst the rise of COVID-19-based Sinophobia. This was intercut with extracts from classic horror movies, drawing clear parallels between the presentation of inhuman monsters such as Dracula and Frankenstein and that of Fu Manchu. There were also teasing glimpses of an altogether less straightforward vision of horror: Lee herself, masked and stalking through woodland.

The format of the remainder of the piece was both straightforward and effective. Scenes from 1930s-1960s Fu Manchu movies, in which Fu Manchu is played by actors including Boris Karloff and Christopher Lee, were screened and then intercut with self-tape performances of the same texts by Southeast and East Asian diasporic actors. These readings were interwoven with the actors' reflections on their interpretation of the character, and more broadly, their experience as Asian diasporic individuals. The lo-fi aesthetic of these self-shot auditions and interviews contrasted with the high budgets afforded to the white actors engaging in racial mimicry. The home self-tape is an audition form that predates COVID-19, but there was something particularly charged in the vision Lee presented of isolated

performers working from home to present a character rooted in the narratives of Yellow Peril that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought bubbling to the surface. The repetition and refiguring of these scenes brought to mind the shifting but irrepressible nature of both the character and anti-Asian prejudice itself.

The movie clips were audio-described, which served a double function: rendering the work more accessible and also drawing sharp attention to the mechanics of the representation of East Asia. Of course, we could see that the actor playing Fu Manchu “appears to be a white man, with theatrical makeup” whereas the non-speaking roles are played by actual East Asians. We may also have known that his gown is “usually worn by East Asian women,” but there was something striking in the declaration of these facts.

Throughout the piece, we returned to Lee’s masked, stalking figure. This unnamed, unexplained character acted as an otherworldly foil to the contemporary reinterpretations of Fu Manchu, many of which humanised the character. Lee’s nameless figure was elegant, scary, and perhaps even ‘exotic’, all qualities Fu Manchu was perhaps originally intended to embody, but in a manner that did not fit within recognisably orientalist iconography.

The work seemed as much about queering as it was about reclaiming Fu Manchu, with eight of the eleven readings of the traditionally male character performed by female and non-binary performers. As well as making a compelling case for gender-conscious casting, these readings highlighted and explored the feminine gendering of East Asia which are a hallmark of Orientalist visions of the East, in a manner more nuanced than playwright Frank Chin’s arguably homophobic engagement with the subject. The gender-conscious casting choices were particularly striking in dialogue with an extract from the movie *Daughter of the Dragon* in which Anna May Wong, playing Fu Manchu’s daughter, pledges to become his son in order to avenge him, a moment that queers assumptions of East Asian femininity even as it reinforces conventional gender roles.

What was notable was the care with which so many of the performers handled the portrayal of a character explicitly designed to dehumanise East Asian peoples. In a work filled with well-researched and deeply felt performances, Elisabeth Gunawan's emotionally grounded and raw reading of Fu Manchu as a mother who has been unable to witness her child grow up was striking in how thoroughly it transcended the pantomime villainy of the original portrayal.



Elisabeth Gunawan in *Casting Fu Manchu*. Photo: Eelyn Lee

Throughout the piece, Fu Manchu became a mirror in which the performers tried to glimpse elements of their own reflection, perhaps as a corrective to the distorted images of East Asia they had grown up with. It was striking the extent to which interpretative choices revealed issues apparently close to the performers' own hearts, from Daniel York Loh's persuasive foregrounding of Fu Manchu's colonial angst, to Gunawan's contextualisation of

her performance in relation to the common occurrence of Southeast Asian mothers estranged from their children due to work abroad.

It is perhaps as much a work about the craft of acting as the politics of representation, but *Casting Fu Manchu* ultimately made a compelling case that the two are inextricably linked. There was an undeniable thrill in watching the nuance and fire extracted from the text by a cast of performers less celebrated than the originators of the roles. At the close of the performance, when the cast listed their dream roles in theatre and film, we were left to reflect on how few of these modest dreams are likely to be realised in an industry within which, as York Loh suggested, casting directors who grew up with *Fu Manchu* are still clinging to the image of China and East Asia he perpetuated and unwilling to cast Asians who stray too far from his distorted image.

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