InterAção

DOSSIÊ
História Cultural e Imaginário Ocidental sobre o Oriente

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STEREOTYPES AND INVISIBILITIES: CINEMA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IMAGERY ABOUT CHINA IN THE WEST

ESTEREÓTIPOS E INVISIBILIDADES: O CINEMA E A CONSTRUÇÃO DO IMAGINÁRIO SOBRE A CHINA NO OCIDENTE

ABSTRACT:

In "How China Is Rewriting Its Own Script", Amy Qin and Audrey Carlsen (2018) asked: "When was the last time you watched a movie with a Chinese villain?" If you don't remember, the authors claim that this may not be a coincidence, since several Hollywood films have had their scripts changed to avoid resenting the Chinese authorities and, consequently, risk losing access to China's gigantic domestic market. If China is trying to rewrite its own scripts, a possible question for this dossier is: what were Hollywood's narratives about China, and why is China trying to change them? Based on poststructuralist perspectives, this article will analyze some films representative of these Hollywood narratives about China, created at times when China did not have the capacity to rewrite its own script, highlighting how they helped to shape the image of the Chinese in the U.S. and the West. It will also address recent changes that have been taking place in the world cinematographic field, with possible diversification of narratives, and on the potential impacts of these events. Thus, this paper intends to contribute to a greater understanding not only of Western images about the East, but also of the role of culture – especially cinema – in the construction of these narratives.

Keywords: China; Cinema; Hollywood; Stereotypes; Poststructuralism

RESUMO:

Em "How China Is Rewriting Its Own Script", Amy Qin e Audrey Carlsen (2018) perguntaram: "qual foi a última vez em que você viu um filme com vilão chinês?". Se você não se lembra, os autores afirmam que isso pode não ser uma coincidência, já que vários filmes de Hollywood tiveram seus roteiros alterados para não melindrar as autoridades chinesas e não correr o risco de perder acesso ao gigantesco mercado interno da China. Se a China está tentando mudar os scripts, uma pergunta possível para este dossiê é: quais eram as narrativas antes criadas por Hollywood sobre a China, e por que a China está tentando alterá-las? Com base em perspectivas pós-estruturalistas, o presente artigo analisará alguns filmes representativos de tais narrativas hollywoodianas sobre a China, criadas em momentos em que o país asiático não tinha a capacidade de reescrever seu próprio script, destacando como essas produções cinematográficas ajudaram a moldar a imagem dos chineses nos EUA e no ocidente. Abordará, também, mudanças recentes que vêm ocorrendo no campo cinematográfico mundial, com possível diversificação de narrativas, e os potenciais impactos desses acontecimentos. Assim, pretende-se contribuir para uma maior compreensão não só dos imaginários ocidentais sobre o oriente, mas também do papel da cultura – especialmente do cinema – na construção dessas narrativas.

Palavras-chave: China; Cinema; Hollywood; Estereótipos; Pós-estruturalismo

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INTRODUCTION

In an article published in November 2018 in the New York Times, entitled "How China Is Rewriting Its Own Script", Amy Qin and Audrey Carlsen (2018) asked: "When was the last time you watched a movie with a Chinese villain? If you can't remember, that may not be too surprising." Then, the authors began to analyze how the power conferred to China by its gigantic domestic market and by the centrality of the State in determining what may or may not be shown in its movies made it possible for the country to shape the narratives created in Hollywood films. The article highlights how several Hollywood movies had their scrip altered to avoid resenting Chinese authorities, since studios that greenlight films critical to China risk have their productions banned from the Asian country, losing a desperately needed income. And that is why there are no Chinese villains in recent Hollywood movies (QIN; CARLSEN, 2018).

There are several interesting aspects to be addressed based on this point – the possible relations between culture and power, the use of cinema as an instrument of foreign policy, among others. However, in this Dossier "Cultural History and the Western Imaginary of the East", perhaps the most pertinent question to ask is: if China, as put by the NYT, is seeking to rewrite its own script, what script was it? In other words: what were Hollywood's narratives about China? To answer this question, we will divide this article as follows.

Initially, I will make brief theoretical considerations about the role of culture in general, and cinema in particular, in International Relations, in order to understand why it is relevant to undertake this type of investigation. After, I will analyze how the U.S. historically used cinema as an instrument of power, and then point out some examples representative of these Hollywood narratives about China, created at times when China did not have the ability to rewrite its own script ", highlighting how this imagery helped shape the image of the Chinese in the U.S. and the West.

Finally, I will conclude with some questions about the recent changes that have been taking place in the world cinema field, with possible diversification of narratives, and about the potential impacts of these events. Methodologically, I will access the literature produced by scholars studying the theme and agents involved in those dynamics, during the 20th Century, when China could not still rewrite its own scripts. Through this path, this paper intends to contribute to a greater understanding not only of Western imagery about the East, but also of the role of culture – especially cinema – in the construction of these narratives.

CULTURE, CINEMA, AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS - THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Poststructuralism argues that language — understood not as a neutral transmitter, but as producing meaning — is essential for the way we comprehend the world (HANSEN, 2020). In this sense, the poststructuralist perspective understands that language has political power, because it is a means of both communication and mystification (WALKER, 1986). Language is considered to be power because it is through discourse that subjects, objects, actors, and identities are constructed (HANSEN, 2016). Furthermore, typical issues of foreign policy analysis, such as national interests, are social constructions that emerge from a ubiquitous and inevitable process of representation (WELDES, 1999). More than that, in theoretical terms, poststructuralism conceptualizes identity as relational and performative: identities have no objective existence, but that they depend on discursive practices (HANSEN, 2020). Thus, the construction of an identity is done through the discourse that is made about that identity, which also takes place in a relational way, in opposition to the other, which is outside that identity.

Poststructuralism also values the concept of intertextuality, according to which we can see the world as made by a diversity of texts, and each text, although unique, relates and refers to other texts (HANSEN, 2020). Among those texts which contribute to the construction of meaning, we can

include cultural artifacts (HANSEN, 2020). Additionally, more critical IR perspectives, such as poststructuralism, can help the researchers to avoid the "cause and effect" constrains of positivism, which must maintain a certain category separation between politics and culture, losing important dynamics in the analysis (GRAYSON; DAVIES; PHILPOTT, 2009).

Therefore, this research will dialogue with the expanding literature which believes that popular culture (included films, television, audiovisual productions in general) function as something beyond mere representations of world politics: "the ongoing and phenomenal growth in the production and circulation of popular culture makes world politics what it currently is" (GRAYSON; DAVIES; PHILPOTT, 2009, p. 156–157, emphasis in the original). Popular cultural texts such as magazines, novels, films, and television shows are important because they are implicated in the production of common sense and therefore in the "manufacture of consent" for states' foreign policies (WELDES, 1999, 2003). Popular cultural artifacts not only make use of the same background meanings (cultural resources) as do policymakers, in order to construct a compelling vision of the world; they also create cultural resources on which other cultural and state actors – and people more generally – draw (ROWLEY, 2015).

Moreover, Daniel and Musgrave (2017) argue that fictional narratives influence behaviors of real actors because when reading, watching, or consuming fictional narratives, people process the stories as if they were actually witnessing the phenomena, even if they are improbable or impossible events. These "synthetic experiences" can change behaviors, reinforce existing views or even replace knowledge acquired from other sources (even formal sources, such as schools and books, for example), both from elites and the masses (DANIEL; MUSGRAVE, 2017).

Another scholar who defends the use and interpretation of films to think about International Relations theories is Cynthia Weber (2010). According to the professor at the University of Sussex, UK, using films to understand IR theories seems to work because of some similarities between how films tell stories and how IR theories tell stories. In this way, it is possible to use films to access what IR theories talks about, how they plot their stories, and how all of this together gives us a particular world view (WEBER, 2010, p. 225).

Roland Bleiker (2018) also highlighted the importance of culture and visuality for understanding the world. According to the academic, we live in a visual world, and visual images are political forces, which shape both international events and our understanding of them. As an example, Bleiker cites the case of Hollywood, which transmits images of so deeply rehearsed and rooted models of villains and heroes that it helps shape social values with its productions. Thus, the ubiquity of the image is political and alters the way we live and interact today (BLEIKER, 2018). According to the professor, images are political in their most fundamental sense, as they outline what we, as a collective, see and do not see, and therefore, by extension, how the political is perceived, sensed, framed, articulated, conducted, and legitimized. Bleiker (2018, p. 20) underlined that "images reveal and conceal. They show and hide, and (...) we often are not aware of what is excluded and what political consequences follow". This point is especially relevant in the case of Western narratives about the East, because, as will be seen below, the constitution of the Hollywood imaginary about the Chinese occurred both through the construction of stereotypes and invisibility, that is, to use the words of Bleiker (2018), both for what the films showed and for what they hid.

To analyze the content of movies, I will follow the recommendations of Grayson, Davies, and Philpott (2009) about possible agendas of investigation to understand the "popular culture-world politics continuum" (in which popular culture and world politics implicate in each other's practices and comprehensions). The authors suggest as a research technique observing "the signifying and lived practices of popular culture as 'texts' that can be understood as political and as sites where politics takes place" (GRAYSON; DAVIES; PHILPOTT, 2009, p. 158).

Therefore, in the next section, I will highlight how the United States traditionally used cinema as an instrument of foreign policy, in order to disseminate American identity abroad. I will also point out how several North American films, whether due to invisibility or the use of stereotypes, contributed to the construction of the Western imagination about China and its population.

THE U.S., HOLLYWOOD, AND THE USE OF CINEMA AS AN INSTRUMENT OF POWER

According to Nicholas Cull (2012), "cinema diplomacy has a long history and America has led the way." It is not a coincidence that Joseph Nye (2004) mentions cinema as one of the elements of soft power, in the book in which the academic created the concept, written in 1990. Regarding the Cold War, Nye (2004) stated that, despite their strength, the culture and propaganda programs coordinated by the Soviet government were unable to keep pace with American popular and commercial culture, which were much more flexible and attractive., e adding that, long before the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, it had already been pierced by television and film (NYE, 2004). Despite the restrictions and censorship of Western films promoted by the Soviet government, the films that managed to be shown were capable of causing devastating political effects: even movies without political pretensions showed that in the West people did not have to spend hours in line to buy food, did not live in community apartments and had their own cars, which invalidated the negative propaganda made by the Soviet media against them (NYE, 2004).

Several academics have studied the use of cinema by the United States government. One of them is Nicholas Cull (2012), who wrote that in the First and Second World Wars and the Cold War, the U.S. government worked closely with producers to spread their messages to global audiences, and even generated profit in the process. David L. Robb has also pointed out how several war and action films produced by Hollywood accepted, in exchange for almost free access to expensive equipment and military agents, the Pentagon's censorship, which ranged from the requirement to withdraw some words to the deletion of entire scenes in order to convey the desired image by the U.S. Armed Forces (ROBB, 2004). More recently, Tom Secker e Matthew Alford (2017a), based on documents obtained by the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), underlined that, between 1911 and 2017, 814 films received support from the U.S. Department of Defense, and that the government was a determining factor in both the creation and extinction of audiovisual projects, even manipulating content. For the authors, it is possible to perceive the surprisingly important role played by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Department of Defense in the cinema entertainment industry (SECKER; ALFORD, 2017b).

In fact, the importance of the role played by Hollywood cinema in spreading US values and ideals to the world is not new. Nor is it something veiled. In a 2002 book, Harvard professor John Trumpbour quoted a speech in London in 1923 by Will Hays, director of Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA, now MPAA – Motion Picture Association of America), an association that represented the main Hollywood film studios. In his speech, Hays stated that:

> Members of our Association have taken… definite steps to make certain that every film that goes from America abroad, wherever it shall be sent, shall correctly portray to the world the purposes, the ideals, the accomplishments, the opportunities, and the life of America (TRUMPBOUR, 2002, p. 17).

It is clear that there are no nuances in Hays' words: all Hollywood films sent abroad must correctly represent the objectives, ideals, achievements, opportunities, and the life of the United States for the world. And this was publicly stated by the head of the most powerful film association in the U.S. and the world.

For China, Hollywood's role in promoting US-friendly narratives was also nothing new. Especially because, according to Ying Zhu (2020), China

itself has a long history of shaping art and culture to serve national interests. Seio Nakajima (2016) also pointed out that since the beginning of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese state has considered cinema as one of the most important means of political education and propaganda, a role that films continue to play today.

Thus, with regard to imports of films from Hollywood, Professor Ying Zhu (2020) highlighted that, both in the republican era and under the Chinese Communist Party, China carried out image control, monitoring and shaping what could be said about the China. This was because there was great resentment towards the negative representations of the Chinese in Hollywood films, which became known as "China-humiliating films", in which Chinese stereotypes such as Fu Manchu, the bandit, the warlord, the houseboy, the laundry-man, stood out. Ying Zhu (2020) cites as an example the case of the movie Welcome Danger (1930), which showed Chinese robbing to live in San Francisco's Chinatown and which faced strong protests from the Chinese, including from the Chinese Consulate in San Francisco. This incident led to a joint manifesto of Chinese cinemas and film professionals denouncing Western imperialism and the campaign to demonize China and the Chinese.

According to Ying Zhu (2020), these "China-humiliating films" provoked a series of protests in the 1930s and 1940s and led, after the founding of the People's Republic of China, to the banning of Hollywood films in Chinese territory. Hollywood movies were banned in Chinese territory until 1994, when, due to the drop in the audience of Chinese films and a decrease in the audience of cinema, the opening of imported films was determined, with a quota of 10 films per year, which ended up being almost all of them Hollywood blockbusters.

In any case, even if prohibited in the domestic market of China, Hollywood films like those that caused the Chinese indignation continued to be made and exhibited, contribu-

ting to the construction of stereotype about the Asian country and its population. In the next section, I will analyze some of these productions, in order to understand how they related to relevant aspects of U.S. domestic politics, or, as put by Hays, how these films sought to correctly represent to the world the goals, ideals, achievements, opportunities, and the life of the United States.

STEREOTYPES, IRRELEVANCE AND INVISIBILITY: IMAGES OF CHINA IN HOLLYWOOD

In the 2019 Hollywood series, directed by Ryan Murphy and Ian Brennan, the story of the golden age of Hollywood is told, mixing fiction and real facts. The series portrays the episode in which Anna May Wong, a well-known Chinese-American movie star, is not chosen to the main role of The Good Earth (1935), a film that told the saga for the survival of a Chinese couple, even with some filming made in China. The role will end up going to German actress Luise Rainer, who will act using yellow face and receive the Oscar for best actress for that.

Another recent production, the Australian documentary Iron Fists and Kung Fu Kicks (2019), directed by Serge Ou, also brings a similar story. The documentary covers, among other topics, the story of the Asian-American Bruce Lee, who had already started to enjoy the kung fu fever in the U.S., acting as Kato, the superhero's Green Hornet sidekick, in the eponymous television series. Bruce Lee had bigger plans and aimed at a prominent role in the American film industry, and for that he had an idea for a TV series, which would mix kung fu and westerns. Nevertheless, the documentary highlights that, since the Second World War, Asian American actors or actresses were not allowed to play the leading role in U.S. films and TV series, which led to the failure of Bruce Lee's project. Warner Bros ended up doing a series very similar to the idea of Bruce Lee. However, Kung Fu (from 1972 to 1975) starred David Carradine, a white

man, who did not even know how to fight kung fu, again using yellow face.

The examples brought by these two recent productions point to practices that were common in Hollywood during much of the 20th century: the exclusion of Asian actors and actresses from central roles in American films. The use of yellow face was one of the facets of this process. According to Nancy Wang Yuen, a sociology professor at Biola University and author of Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism, yellow face meant "they actually, literally yellowed up their skin." The professor also stated that "They did it in a way that was to make fun of, that was to make Chinese and Asians look as sinister or as buffoonish as possible, and that kind of portrayal reproduced the stereotypes that were existent in society." She highlight: "I would say also exacerbated the nativism and xenophobia that people had" (LEE, 2019).

Commenting on the case of Anna Mae Wong in the film The Good Earth (1935), Professor Yuen explains that this was due to an existing production law in Hollywood. "The industry itself put up a production law, and part of the clause was this anti-miscegenation clause that said that you could not have interracial romances on-screen" (LEE, 2019). It is possible to access online the document through which "a resolution incorporating the Don'ts and Be-Carefuls is now officially adopted by the MPPDA", from 1927, in which one can read that "those things which are included in the following list shall not appear in pictures produced by the members of this Association, irrespective of the manner in which they are treated: (...) 6. Miscegenation (sex relationship between white and black races[2])". In other words: the representations on the screen were even supported by domestic policy, even consolidated by law.

That does not mean that Chinese and Asian actors and actresses were completely removed from the film business. They just didn't act in leading roles, interacting with white actors and actresses. But there were other roles for them. As the Chinese American filmmaker and author Arthur Dong pointed out, "I was always curious about the Chinese or Asian actress I saw on screen, whether films from the early part of cinema history up to today, especially the '20s and '30s and '40s, where I saw Chinese characters on screen" (LEE, 2019). However, according to Dong, "they were always playing servants, coolies, laundry man. And if they were women, they were prostitutes or servants" (LEE, 2019).

Anna Mae Wong, explaining why she abandoned her career in Hollywood, also addressed this issue:

> I was tired of the parts I had to play. Why is it that on the screen the Chinese are nearly always the villain of the piece, and so cruel a villain - murderous, treacherous, a snake in the grass. We are not like that. How could we be, with a civilization so many times older than that of the West? We have our rigid code of behavior, of honor. Why do they never show those on the screen? (TIANA, 1995, p. 38)

In the case of Chinese women, these questions were even more pronounced. Two stereotypes are markedly perceived in Chinese actresses representations: the Dragon Lady and the Lotus Blossom (JOHNSON, 2004). Dragon Ladies are "an evil amoral vamp" (ALQUIZOLA; HIRABAYASHI, 2003), being both exciting and dangerous, having "treacherously enticing wiles" (LIU, 2000, p. 24). Lotus Blossoms, on the other hand, are "sexual playthings for Caucasians" (ALQUIZOLA; HIRABAYASHI, 2003), being feminine and delicate, also referred to China Dolls (LEE, 2018). Lotus Blossoms are sexually knowledgeable and pander to the needs of men (JOHNSON, 2004).

Both the Dragon Lady and the Lotus Blossom are highly sexualized, exotic objects in American culture, and subsequently the "widespread perception of Asian women as inherently, exotically sexual is too often taken as fact" (YAMAMOTO, 2000, p. 52). Yamamoto (2000) also states that the objectification and commodification of these women's bodies does not provide visibility for them as individuals. Or, to use Anna May Wong words again: "We are not like that.

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[2] Document "Scan #3-2410 For Record #365", available at: https://mppda.flinders.edu.au/records/365.

How could we be, with a civilization so many times older than that of the West? We have our rigid code of behavior, of honor. Why do they never show those on the screen?" (TIANA, 1995, p. 38).

These negative representations of the Chinese, according to Dong, contributed to "a perception of the Chinese as the 'yellow peril,' the sinister Chinese, the Chinese that you couldn't trust. And that resulted in the character called Fu Manchu" (LEE, 2019). Fu Manchu was a very sadistic and cruel villain who wanted to destroy the Western world. The character Fu Manchu became the personification of the yellow peril, and he represented the tension between the morally pure and superior West and the "mysterious, seductively evil East" (HOPPENSTAND, 1992, p. 279). And, of course, Fu Manchu's various representations on television and film have always been played by white actors wearing yellow face.

In addition to these practices of excluding Chinese from leading roles and stereotyping their representations, yet another traditional motto of the script that China tries to change was the invisibility. As highlighted by Bleiker (2018, p. 20), "images reveal and conceal. They show and hide, and (...) we often are not aware of what is excluded and what political consequences follow". Thus, both presenting a stereotyped view and not showing Chinese at all are part of this process of creating the Western imagination about China.

A typical case in which this occurred was in western films. From 1850 to 1882 (when the Chinese Exclusion Act was approved), the frontier was also populated by roughly 20,000 Chinese immigrants who contributed significantly to the development of the West, including the construction of the first Transcontinental Railroad (WILLIAM, 2016). At certain times, 9 out of 10 railroad workers were Chinese (KENNEDY, 2019). But these "Chinese immigrants have been largely ignored by history." One reason for this may be the lack of representation of this population in films about the West. In William's words (2016), "when filmmakers weren't misrepresenting other races (whether intentionally or not), they were often ignoring them entirely". He mentioned John Ford's

The Iron Horse (1924), which "manages to tell the story of the country's first transcontinental railroad without Chinese actors, save a few who were background extras". Moreover, in addition to occasional quick appearances as laundry-men, it is quite difficult to notice the presence of Chinese on the U.S. border by western films. For a population that made up 9 out of 10 workers in the construction of railroads, a very frequent theme of the genre, and whose massive presence in the labor market made it uncomfortable to the point of passing legislation banning entry into the U.S., clearly the representation on the screens does not seem to be consistent with reality.

The preceding paragraphs may raise some questions. One of them, relevant to this dossier, is: what is the reason for these representations of the Chinese in Hollywood films? One path to the answer may lie in Hays' aforementioned speech about how Hollywood films "shall correctly portray to the world the purposes, the ideals, the accomplishments, the opportunities, and the life of America" (TRUMPBOUR, 2002, p. 17). If, as the poststructuralists conceptualize, identity is relational and performative (HANSEN, 2020), so one way of building the U.S. identity is in opposition to the other, to the outside, to the foreign. For this, a useful mechanism can be to resort to an external enemy. Perhaps that is why the "yellow peril" image is so present, that "depicts Asians and Asian Americans as threatening, taking over, invading, or negatively "Asianizing" U.S. society and culture" (KIM, 2013, p. 22). Thus, representing the Chinese as ruthless villains, as seductive murderers, as sexual objects or as buffoons, could, by contrast, help to strengthen the desired image of the U.S. identity built by Hollywood.

THE FUTURE AND THE REWRITING OF THE SCRIPT

We circle back, then, to the NYT's article about "How China Is Rewriting Its Own Script". The article deals with a topic that has already been widely discussed in academia. Robert Daly, director of the Kissinger Institute on China and the United Sta-

tes, at the Wilson Center in Washington / D.C., for example, highlighted the fact that there have been no films in recent years that depict the Chinese Communist Party or mainland Chinese characters in a critical light. […] Instead, China has saved the world in '2012' and 'The Martian" (DALY, 2016).

In fact, in an paper presented at the 60th Annual Convention of the International Studies Association (ISA), in 2019, Sale Lilly and Christian Curriden, from RAND Corporation, tested the hypothesis that the size of the Chinese market and the increase in Chinese investments in Hollywood have influenced the U.S. film industry to serve the political and social ends of the Chinese state. To this end, the academics used a software to analyze scripts for movies produced in the U.S. from 1992 to 2018, and quantitatively investigate situations in which the terms "China" or "Chinese" appeared, and whether these occurrences are related to positive and negative implications, in order to observe if there has been a change in these connotations over time. Lilly and Curriden (2019) stated that, between the 1990s and 2010, there was a decrease in terms related to politics and crime in films made in Hollywood that deal with China.

Lilly and Curriden (2019) also found that the number of productions that refer to the Chinese government or the Chinese language increased, even in productions that had no relationship with China or that did not include Chinese protagonists or that were co-productions, "perhaps because China's global relevance is now taken for granted by script writers". In addition, political themes have practically disappeared from films or scenes related to China. It is important to note that Chinese politicians or the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were not treated positively, but rather more neutrally. Finally, they pointed out that Chinese villains and criminals still exist, but are less and less common (LILLY; CURRIDEN, 2019).

Robert Daly further pondered that there may be problems with this type of representation. According to Daly (2018), when American culture is functioning in a free and healthy fashion, movies — being them good, bad, or indifferent — are one of the ways through which the society processes

matters of great concern, as in the case of the World War II or the Cold War. Thus, if there are no movies being made that show China in a critical tone – because Hollywood studios will not green-light films that can be questioned by China for portraying the country or the Party badly –, this means that American culture is not functioning in a free and healthy fashion (DALY, 2018). And the blame, according to Daly, is not on China, but on Hollywood: the people who "supposed to be the shapers of American dreams, of images, the builders of American soft power", in their desire for profit and by "pursuing the Chinese dollar they have allowed the Communist Party to censor what Americans see in the multiplex now" (DALY, 2018).

There are those who see geopolitical issues in the theme. A recent example was the bill proposed by the Texas Senator Ted Cruz (Republican) which he called the Stopping Censorship, Restoring Integrity and Protecting Talkies Act (DAVIS, 2020). According to the bill, Hollywood studios would be prohibited from using U.S. government funds for film production if they alter content to suit Chinese censors. Mentioning the case of the upcoming Top Gun 2, co-financed by China's Tencent Pictures, in which the flags of Taiwan and Japan have been digitally removed from the back of Tom Cruise's flight jacket to appease Beijing, Cruz asked the U.S. Senate: "What message does it send that Maverick, an American icon, is apparently afraid of the Chinese Communists?" (DAVIS, 2020).

This discussion on narratives, culture and international relations can take several directions. But, for the purpose of this article, a relevant idea may be the potential of culture in building a more integrated and more harmonious world. As Ambassador Edgard Telles Ribeiro wrote (2011), culture can play an important role in overcoming barriers that separate peoples, promoting mutual understanding and reducing distrust. The Ambassador still warns that this will not always happen, but it is enough that it happens with some frequency to justify the efforts and resources undertaken.

There is yet another point. In 2009, in a very inspiring TED Talk, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie spoke about the dangers of uni-

que history, commenting that, while growing up in Nigeria, everything she read referred to the narratives created by Europeans and Americans, and it seemed that the whole world was as described in those books. Therefore, she advocated that more stories were told by other people, from other places, which would make the world more diverse and plural (ADICHIE, 2009). In this sense, that there is not only one type of representation of Chinese – as in some of the films mentioned above – can contribute to a world with a greater plurality of stories, representations and narratives.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this article, I aimed to show how cinema can, in a broad sense, contribute to shaping the way people see the world and world politics. More specifically, I sought to point out how Hollywood films contributed to the construction of images of China in the West.

Therefore, after some theoretical considerations about how poststructuralism understands the role of language, visuality and cinema as sources of power, I started to highlight how the USA traditionally used films as instruments of foreign policy. Thus, I stressed that, since the dawn of Hollywood, films have been an explicit way of exporting American values, ideas and ways of life to the world. In this sense, to forge this North American identity – relational and performative – the recourse to opposition with the other, the stranger, the foreigner was often employed.

Thus, the imaginary about the Chinese was built in opposition to this desired U.S. identity. In the films, this was done mainly through stereotypes and invisibilities. As I mentioned, Chinese and Asian American actors or actress were denied leading role at Hollywood movies. Even when they got the roles, they could not have affairs with their white counterparts. Also, the roles reserved to the Chinese and Asian American artists were all stereotyped: ruthless villains, as seductive murderers, as sexual objects or as buffoons. And that, by contrast, could help to strengthen the desired image of the U.S. identity built by Hollywood.

Finally, I underlined that has been happening a shift in these representations of China and the Chinese. Some blame Hollywood' profit-seeking posture for that, some say that those changes are geopolitical in nature. Nevertheless, a possible perspective could be to focus on the potential of potential of culture in building a more integrated and more harmonious world, playing an important part in overcoming barriers that separate peoples, promoting mutual understanding and reducing distrust. Moreover, the diversification of narratives about the orient, and Asia and China can contribute to a world with a greater plurality of stories, representations and narratives.

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