

The Dragon Painter

By Daisuke Miyao

“The Dragon Painter” (William Worthington, 1919) was the first of Robertson-Cole Distributing Corporation’s new series of “Hayakawa Superior Pictures.” In 1919, Sessue Hayakawa, a Japanese-born actor, was at the peak of his superstardom, after the sensation success with the role of a sexy but villainous Japanese art dealer in “The Cheat” (Cecil B. DeMille, 1915). In March 1918, after two years of stardom at the Jesse L. Lasky Feature Play Company, Hayakawa established his own film production company, Haworth Pictures Corporation. Despite his popularity, Hayakawa was not fully satisfied with his star image that was created at Lasky. Lasky took a double-barreled strategy that would make Hayakawa heroic, sympathetic, and assimilated enough to become a star but keep his non-white persona safely distanced from white middle-class Americans. Lasky made clear the aspect of refinement in Hayakawa’s image, especially his embodying of exotic Japaneseness, typified by his acting skill manifested in his performances. Simultaneously, Lasky emphasized the Americanized characteristics of Hayakawa’s personas (obedience to American laws, assimilation to the American way of life, etc.).

Hayakawa’s dissatisfaction was caused by the Japanese-American communities’ unfavorable reactions. Right after the release of “The Cheat,” the “Rafu Shimpō,” a Japanese-American newspaper, severely criticized Hayakawa’s character in the film. Hayakawa became anxious about his reputation among Japanese people in the U.S. and tried to get along with Japanese-American communities. At the launching of Haworth, Hayakawa declared that he would introduce authentic Japanese characters in his films. “The Moving Picture World” reported in July 1918, “Hayakawa sent several of his company to Japan ... to film scenes for the initial production. They have just returned, bringing with them about four thousand feet of film taken in Tokio and Yokohama and in the wonderfully beautiful Mt. Fujiyama region.”

Nevertheless, it is doubtful that Hayakawa seriously wanted to portray authentic Japan. The method that Hayakawa took was hardly original. Many early travelogue filmmakers had been sent to Japan to obtain images that would look authentic to foreign audiences, such as Mt. Fuji or geisha dances. Unfavorable



The “Dragon Painter” (Sessue Hayakawa) studies his model (Tsuji Aoki). Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

reactions from Japanese spectators made Hayakawa realize the need to at least adjust his star image by balancing his already established star image for American audiences with his reputation among Japanese spectators.

“The Dragon Painter” was an example of such a balancing act. While Hayakawa was gearing towards authentic Japaneseness, Robertson-Cole, which was expanding its influence in the distributing business, pressured on Haworth, an independent company, to produce films that would appeal to the popular American audience. “The Dragon Painter” was publicized as if it showed authentic Japan. The “Moving Picture World” reported in September 1919, “In this setting the village of Hakone, Japan, was duplicated even to its famous Shintu [sic] gates. Each setting is so naturally beautiful that it is hard to realize the perfection of the interior detail. The picturesqueness of ‘The Land of the Rising Sun’ has been fully retained in ‘The Dragon Painter.’” Contrary to this report, “Kinema Junpo,” a Japanese film magazine, pointed out in April 1922, “[“The Dragon Painter”] did not show either contemporary or actual Japan.” “The Dragon Painter” craftily displayed the exotic and picturesque Japan that many American audiences had been accustomed to.

“The Dragon Painter” was based on a story written by Mary McNeil Fenollosa. Her husband Ernest was a famous Japanologist, whose collection became the basis of the Japanese art collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and the trendsetter of *Japonisme* in the U.S. First, the imaginary Orientalist aspect of “The Dragon Painter” is indicated by its

choice of strange Japanesque names: Undobuchida; Kano Indara, which may be a mixture of a Japanese painter Kano and a fourteenth-century Chinese painter Indara, etc. In the only surviving print, the hero's name is not Tatsu, which is more suitable for a Japanese name, but Ten-Tsuou.

Second, "The Dragon Painter" utilizes the Eurocentric archetypal dichotomy between wilderness and civilization. The opening shot, an extreme long shot of Hanake, artificially combines the actual location of Yosemite Valley and Japanesque objects, such as a *torii*, and establishes Japan as a wild and picturesque place. The mountains, waterfalls, and rocks of Yosemite are displayed in the background, signifying nature and wilderness. Clouds move fast, as if they were shown in fast motion and thus enhance the fantastic atmosphere. Throughout the film, Tatsu (played by Hayakawa), a creator of sophisticated Japanese ink paintings, a signature artifact of *Japonisme*, moves back and forth between savage/wilderness and refinement/civilization.

Umeko (played by Hayakawa's real life wife, Tsuru Aoki) embodies the Orientalist image of Japan more clearly than Tatsu. Umeko's room is filled with typical signifiers of *Japonisme*: a Japanese garden with a gate, a stream, a small bridge, stone lanterns, and a peacock in front of a small shrine; a room with *tatami* mats, *fusuma*, Japanese sliding doors, and *shoji*; paintings of Mt. Fuji and a dragon; paper lanterns. She wears a luxurious kimono and the beautiful hairstyle of an unmarried woman, *shimada*. After making up in front of a Japanese-style mirror table, she dances a Japanese dance with a silver fan in front of

flowers arranged in a Japanese style, while her housemaid plays the *samisen*, a Japanese banjo-like musical instrument, and Japanese drums. She sits beside a *shoji* window under the beautiful moon. Even after the wedding, Umeko keeps wearing her long-sleeved kimono, which married women traditionally do not wear, and her *shimada* hairstyle, which should have changed to the less showy *marumage* of married women. Umeko even shows her extremely obedient and self-sacrificial nature as a stereotypical Japanese woman by committing suicide as Cio-Cio-San does in "Madame Butterfly."

Thus, "The Dragon Painter" rearticulated the Japanese aspect of Hayakawa's star image in the context of popular Orientalism in the U.S. The result was very favorable. A reviewer in the "Exhibitors' Herald" claimed in October 1919, "Optically this is one of Sessue Hayakawa's best offerings. In pictorial appeal it is the strongest thing the Haworth Company has ever done." The "New York Times" also selected this film as one of "The Year's Best" in 1919.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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