

The recently released *Lucy* bundles its Asian cast in a faceless and sinister group (right), while *The Maze Runner* made Minho (played by Korean-American actor Ki Hong Lee, far right) a strong, positive character.



PHOTOS: TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX, UIP, REUTERS, BANANAMANA FILMS, WARNER BROS

# BREAKING THE ASIAN MOULD

The *Maze Runner*'s Asian actor is free of stereotyping, a change from the typical predominantly Caucasian Hollywood films



**John Lui**  
Film Correspondent

The opening of the much-anticipated *The Maze Runner* this week brings a pleasant surprise in the shape of the supporting character Minho, a member of the troupe in the Glade.

Recognisably East Asian, Minho (played by Korean-American actor Ki Hong Lee) is thankfully free of stereotyping - he speaks without a ching-chong Asian accent, is not the comical foreigner, sinister force, kickboxer or a prop that adds exoticism.

Seeing the number of films that replace Asians in the source material with white characters, that Minho made it to the screen as an Asian is rare. That he is a strong, positive character is astounding.

In Hollywood, the factory that makes all its heroes light-eyed, fair-haired Northern Europeans - Jesus, Noah, Moses, Genghis Khan among them - ready to change?

Remember, this is a place that loves to borrow Asian stories, but is allergic to casting racially appropriate actors. The studios bend plotlines to breaking point so that "white saviours" can emerge in China (David Carradine in the *Kung Fu* television series) or Japan (Tom Cruise in *The Last Samurai*, 2003; or, more recently, Keanu Reeves in last year's *47 Ronin*).

Even in science-fiction and fantasy, in worlds with mutants and monsters, the leads have to be

recognisably Caucasian. In 2009's anime-based *Dragonball Evolution*, the lead of Goku was taken by Justin Chatwin (Chow Yun Fat and Jamie Chung had supporting parts) and there are reports that Margot Robbie (from last year's *Wolf Of Wall Street*) will play the cybernetic Major Motoko Kusanagi in the live-action adaptation of the cult anime *Ghost In The Shell* (1995).

If you have cringed watching Asian portrayals in Western media - white actors with taped eyes speaking "Asian-accented" English (as in *Cloud Atlas*, 2012), obviously Westernised Korean-American actors forced to speak Mandarin badly or Japanese females fetishised as ninja assassins or sex sirens - you know the feeling.

Actor Adrian Pang, 48, shuttled between London and Singapore for a few years before settling here in 2001. While he thinks that more can be done to address the issue of positive parts for Asian actors in English-language works, he says that at least part of the problem arises from the insularity of the Asian community in countries such as England.

"Writers have no understanding of who we are or where we come from. Any roles written for us will be superficial or just ticking checkboxes," he says.

He was shocked to see that the practice of using Asian clichés as set dressing had not gone away. In one episode of the BBC series *Sherlock*, set in modern Chinatown, "Chinese were shown shrouded in mysticism, spouting pearls of Confucian wisdom", he says.

"In the 12 years since I left London, things have not moved on. My goodness, people are still putting up with that s\*\*\*," he says.

Two 40something actors, Christian Lee and Jason Chan, now work here after having left their former home bases in the United States and Australia, respectively, in large part because they are not confined to supporting roles here, or are repeatedly asked to play gangsters, pimps or immigrants speaking broken English.

Chan says the otherwise enjoyable action thriller *Lucy* (now playing in cinemas) was ruined for him by how it casually lumped Asians into a faceless, sinister pile (such as by having Korean-speaking actor Choi Min Sik play a Taiwanese gangster).

Chan remembers a scene in *Lucy* in which a white female expatriate living in Taipei notes that she had just spent a night with a new lover. She then points out that this man was Caucasian.

Sounding annoyed, he says: "I find it flabbergasting that it needed to be said. Someone actually had to write that in the script. The director and producer read it and said 'That's good'. Or someone came along, read it, and asked for it to be made clear that the man was not Chinese."

He points out that this bizarrely anachronistic attitude towards the non-white races and interracial liaisons for now seems to be confined to mainstream American cinema.

In a German production shot in Singapore five years ago, he played the romantic male lead opposite a white German actress. As an actor used to playing non-romantic supporting parts in Western productions, this was an eye-opener.

"For me, it was huge. I sat there reading the script and I went, wow," says Chan, who trained at

the National Institute of Dramatic Art in Sydney (which trained Hugo Weaving, Cate Blanchett and Baz Luhrmann, among others).

For Lee, Chan's partner in production house Bananamana Films, the last straw came when he was

cast in an American telemovie titled *Marco Polo*. He was aghast that Brian Dennehy was picked to play Kublai Khan, while he and other Asians were put in supporting parts. He came to Singapore to work on local television not long after and decided to stay.

He and Chan's dream was to reflect the contemporary urban Asian experience in English, a formula no Western studio would want and it is an idea that even Asian broadcasters are wary to test.

But they pitched the concept to MediaCorp's online video service Toggle, and they got the commission to make 13 half-hour episodes of the drama-comedy about love and dating, *What Do*

*Men Want?*

Lee and Chan write, produce, direct and act in it, and it will be screened on Channel 5 next month.

Their new Web-only project, the romantic drama *Perfect Girl*, is self-funded. Available on [perfectgirlseries.com](http://perfectgirlseries.com), it comprises 10 five-minute episodes.

Besides being that rare Asian English-language product, the drama also boasts a novel business model: The first five episodes are free; to watch the remaining five, a fee of US\$1.99 (S\$2.50) is charged.

Andrew Ooi founded and owns Echelon Talent Management, which represents Singaporean actor Chin Han (*The Dark Knight*, 2008), Russell Wong and Josie Ho. Ooi, who is also a film producer, specialises in placing Asian actors in films made both in North America and Asia. American actor Wong, for example, is now making the HBO Asia horror series *Grace in Singapore*, while Hong Kong-based Ho was just here acting in Eric Khoo's erotic drama *In The Room*.

Ooi is aware of the problems faced by non-white actors in North America. He cites the much-criticised thriller *21* (2008), based on the true story of a group of mostly Asian whiz kids from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard who counted cards and won millions from casinos. The film, based on the book about them, greatly diminished the Asian presence.

While it is true that the non-white presence is often reduced or eliminated from American cinema, he cites the statistic - only about 5 per cent of the American population, including Asian Americans, like everyone else, "like to see themselves on screen".

But things are slowly coming around, he says. Chin Han has a leading part in the upcoming Netflix series *Marco Polo*, now in production and, as far as Ooi knows, all Asian parts are played by Asians in the series.

As China's share of the global box office grows - with its box office last year at US\$3.6 billion, it has recently become the largest overseas market for Hollywood - change will happen, says Ooi.

Chinese companies are also investing in Hollywood, he says. Chinese product placement in this year's *Transformers: Age Of Extinction* brought in Chinese locations and the casting of actress Li Bingbing, for example.

Chinese actors need to be linked with Chinese products for maximum marketing impact, he says.

"The Chinese investors are saying, 'If you want our money and our product placement, you have to put our actors in your movie, people that our demographic can recognise,'" he says.

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The *Maze Runner* opens in cinemas here tomorrow.

Send your views to [stflife@sph.com.sg](mailto:stflife@sph.com.sg)

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Actor Adrian Pang, who used to shuttle between London and Singapore



Actors Jason Chan (right) and Christian Lee (far right) moved to Singapore to break out of supporting roles or stereotypical Asian roles. Lee played a supporting role in *Marco Polo* (above), but Brian Dennehy was given the role of Kublai Khan.



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