

That would be the day...

"People with red hair have hot tempers" and "Young men are careless drivers" are two common stereotypes you may have heard. A *stereotype* is an opinion of a group that is based on the behavior of a few members of the group. Stereotypes usually ignore individual differences among members of a group. When racial or ethnic groups are stereotyped, members of these groups may find themselves facing prejudice and discrimination. They are judged by the stereotype, not as individuals with individual interests and talents.

The next selection discusses the efforts of one group of Americans to break down stereotypes that kept them from gaining certain jobs.

The Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center in New York City has been found guilty of discrimination because it "systematically failed or refused to give equal opportunity" to Asian American actors, "particularly as evidenced by the regular awarding of Oriental parts to non-Oriental actors."

Commissioner Albert Pacetta, of the State Human Rights Appeal Board, said that the exclusion of Asians from the theater was not just a case of job discrimination, but that it also reinforced negative stereotypes of Asians projected by the entertainment industry.

"The impressions or knowledge we have about Asians is limited to stereotypes such as the Chinese laundryman, the Chun King Chinese commercial, the chop-suey restaurants, the half-wit in the Charlie Chan movies who keeps saying 'Gee, Pop!', geisha girls, and finally the mysterious, poker-faced inscrutables," he said. "Hollywood and the theater can be thanked for the images."

Alvin Lum, who is from Hawaii and is president of the Oriental Actors of America, explained the Asian actors' plight. "White men can be made up to play anybody's part. It is difficult for an Oriental or a black to play anybody else. The ideal thing is for actors to be able to play all parts. We're not in that ideal situation. The first step

Based on "Asian American Actors Fight for Jobs and Images" by Frank Ching from *The New York Times*, June 3, 1973. Copyright © 1973 by The New York Times Company. Reprinted by permission.

is to do major Oriental parts.”

“Teahouse of the August Moon” and “The King and I” are two shows in which the lead Asian roles are played by Caucasians [whites]. Even Charlie Chan, the Chinese detective, has never been played by a Chinese actor.

“If only the mass media [newspapers, radio, and television] can stop thinking of us as inhuman,” said Miss Sun, who plays an 18-year-old Eurasian in “As the World Turns,” a Columbia Broadcasting System soap opera. “What makes us so different? We bleed like everybody else, we have money problems, housing problems, like everybody else. We get the flu. We don’t have any magical power.”

Asked if she had ever played the role of a non-Asian, Miss Sun replied: “Never. That would be the day.”

Because Caucasian actors may be awarded major Asian parts, it is sometimes difficult for Asian actors to get even the minor roles.

“If they decide to cast a white actor as a star, they are very hesitant to put an Asian in there,” said Mr. Shimono, a third-generation Japanese American from Sacramento, California. “If you put an Oriental in there, the white man stands out” and doesn’t look Oriental in spite of his eye make-up.

“When I grew up, I always thought that to be an Asian was second class,” Mr. Shimono said. “Obviously we couldn’t be too good, because every time on the screen or TV we saw white guys playing us. Obviously there’s something wrong with us.”

QUESTIONS

1. The Oriental actors went to court to end discrimination. What other methods do you think they could have used?
2. The selection refers to “negative stereotypes.” Can you think of any stereotypes that are not negative?
3. Alvin Lum says: “White men can be made up to play anybody’s part.” Do you think this is true? Could the same thing be said of black men? Asian men? white women? black women? Asian women? Why or why not?



The movie industry has a long history of discrimination against Asian American actors. In all of the Charlie Chan movies, the lead was played by a Caucasian actor; an Oriental actor was apparently only good enough to play the stereotype. Charlie's very dumb, Number One Son. When a part that was not stereotyped came along, a Caucasian, like Edward G. Robinson, was almost always selected to play the part.