

A view to killing off stereotypes

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Dr Xiang Gao takes aim at the simplistic and stereotypical portrayals of Asian characters in Bond films. Credit: University of New England

Looking for insights into geopolitics? Eager to learn about foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific region? Don't rely on James Bond films for your education.

The blockbusters may be [box office](#) hits but are a potentially dangerous and inaccurate proxy for real [international relations](#), according to Dr. Xiang Gao, UNE Senior Lecturer and avowed fan of the suave British Secret Service agent 007.

In an article just published in the [International Journal of James Bond Studies](#), Xiang takes aim at the simplistic and stereotypical portrayals of Asian characters in Bond films, which typically depict perilous encounters with sinister supervillains in exotic locations.

"The Bond movies are a mirror of historical and contemporary international relations and a window into interactions between East and West," said Xiang, who teaches politics and international relations. "They take us from traditional security threats like military power and nuclear weapons to modern-day transnational crime and terrorism. They can be very influential in shaping attitudes and perceptions, especially among viewers with limited direct experience of other people and countries."

From the earliest Bond movies, Xiang said Asian people have been perpetually portrayed as aliens, if not enemies—think hench people, murderous entrepreneurs and samurai wrestlers—on the rare occasions when they do appear (Asian elements appear in only nine of the 25 films to date). Audience experiences of Asia have been narrowed to "crowded Thai marketplaces, shabby Vietnamese housing, Japanese high-rise technology, curry-loving Indians, and the loyal communist Chinese," when in reality, "the Asia-Pacific region hosts diverse civilizations and communities."

This reductionist view is dangerous on a personal, societal and international level. "It doesn't help our understanding of other societies and can feed into the kind of hostility we saw during the COVID pandemic, when people from Asia were treated poorly," Xiang said.

"This type of stereotyping in popular film is also not conducive to good business relations or foreign policy, which should recognize the cultural, political and linguistic diversity and complexity of the societies and cultures we are engaging with."

It is only in more recent Bond films that Asian characters have emerged as allies, perhaps, Xiang suggests, partially due to globalization and the burgeoning (and extremely lucrative) cinema market in China, the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia. Fewer representations of ethnic Chinese villains or a villainous Chinese Government has also echoed geopolitical and economic developments, especially Asia's growing trade power since the late 1970s.

Xiang has been encouraged that the characterization of Asian people and storylines has become less one-dimensional over the lifetime of the resilient MI6 agent. But in continuing to perpetuate perspectives that don't accurately "capture the dynamics of real-life power and politics" the influential film franchise exposes both broader misunderstandings of Asia and global foreign policy that over-emphasizes ideological differences rather than commonalities.

"How we identify ourselves and perceive our enemies or allies matters to [foreign policy](#)," she said. "The perception of a nuclear threat is a good example. Five hundred British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than five North Korean [nuclear weapons](#). This sense of who the 'other' is can easily extend to [minority groups](#) and those who look different or do not share our religious beliefs.

"It's a critical time in terms of increasing our knowledge and understanding of our Asia-Pacific neighbors and rethinking Australia's position. How are we going to promote our national interest and contribute to a liberal world order with the US as our traditional ally, an increasingly assertive China in the Asia-Pacific, and other global

challenges?"

More information: Xiang Gao, Aliens, Enemies, and Allies: Images of Asia in the James Bond Films, *International Journal of James Bond Studies* (2023). [DOI: 10.24877/jbs.95](https://doi.org/10.24877/jbs.95)

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