

The Mask of Fu Manchu (1932 USA) MGM running time 67 minutes

The central character of this film was originally the creation of Sax Rohmer, an American novelist (fl. 1918). Coming onto the pulp-fiction scene around World War I, his name is probably derived from news reports which vilified the Qing dynasty ("the Manchus") in the wake of the 1911 Revolution and the establishment of the Republic of China. Over time, due to the popularity of this sub-genre of fiction and film, it became a household word associated with a twitching mustache and long fingernails, nefarious plots and cruelty. In fact a Fu Manchu TV series continued in the US during the 1950s.

This film stars Boris Karloff, the most famous horror-film actor of his day, as Dr. Fu Manchu and Myrna Loy as his daughter (Fa Lo See). Dr. Fu Manchu (as he says elsewhere "I got my PhD in Oriental torture") is portrayed as a diabolical villain bent on the destruction of the West. The movie opens in London, ironically at the British Museum (from a postmodern perspective a museum is sometimes interpreted as a Western institution which attempts to classify, label and thereby trivialize the objects and artifacts of non-Western cultures). The chief curator appeals to an archaeologist by first asking him: "Do you love your country?" then sending him on a mission to find the tomb of Genghis Khan (Chinese: Cheng-ji-si-han), the ancient Mongolian conqueror of Central Asia, Russia and China, in order to recover his golden mask and scimitar (sword), before these magic objects fall into the hands of Fu Manchu and enable him to unite the East to rise up against and conquer the West.

Dr. Fu waits for the British archaeological team, along with German Professor von Berg, to discover the tomb and unearth these objects. He then kidnaps the key players, including the blonde Sheila Barton (played by Karen Morley) and relies on torture to obtain the sword and mask. He uses rays in a high-tech lab to test the genuineness of the objects in question. The rays are also his secret weapon. In a secondary plot, his daughter has her African slaves suspend and whip Terrance Granville (Charles Starrett), fiance of Sheila, whom Miss Fu lusts after. She is excited during the ordeal and then has him laid on her bed, where she intends to seduce him, but is interrupted by her father, who proposes manufacturing a serum out of the venom extracted by Chinese-looking "scientists" from a tarantula, a snake (they have it bite someone's arm) and a salamander, which is injected into Terry in order to make him do Dr. Fu's (and his daughter's) bidding. Terry is awakened from his stupor, however, by Sheila's protestations of her love for him and Dr. Fu is thwarted just as he is presiding over a meeting of caliphs, viziers and other "Eastern" potentates at which he inexplicably gets an idol to present Genghis Khan's sword to him in a religious ceremony. Terry jumps Fu, strikes him with the sword, and carries Sheila off in his arms. The other Western archaeologists then use Fu's ray gun to blast the costumed Eastern potentates (most look Turkic, Islamic and central Asian) who have been invited there as potential allies by Fu.

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Returning to Europe on a steamship, the main characters, about to throw the sword overboard, are startled by the banging of a gong, summoning them to dinner. When they ask its carrier, a Chinese service person, if he has a PhD, he replies he does not. Relieved, they complete the task of dropping the sword into the sea, but prophesy that there may be other Fu Manchus to come.

discussion questions:

1. What symbols are utilized from nature and how do they figure in? (Gobi desert, the storm toward the end of the film as the Western archaeological teams approaches Fu's residence, etc.).
2. How does Dr. Fu treat his daughter and what does this tell us about his values and those of his society?
3. What is Dr. Fu's strategy and why does this threaten the West?
4. Might Dr. Fu represent Western fears of Japan's goals of building a "Greater East Asian Prosperity Sphere"?
5. Aside from his attempted use of hi-tech, what other characteristics make Dr. Fu diabolical?
6. Is Dr. Fu's society somewhere you would like to live? Why or why not?
7. What are Dr. Fu's weapons and what are those of the West?

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