



**Name in English:** Keye Luke

**Name in Chinese:** 麟 [陸錫麟]

**Name in Pinyin:** Lù Xīlín

**Gender:** Male

**Birth Year:** 1904-1991

**Birth Place:** Guangzhou, China

**Profession (s):** Actor, Artist

**Education:** Graduate, Franklin High School - Seattle, Washington, 1922

**Awards:** 1990, Star (Motion Pictures) - Hollywood Walk of Fame, Hollywood Chamber of Commerce; 1986, Lifetime Achievement Award, Association of Asian/Pacific American Artists

**Contribution (s):**

Keye Luke represented Asian America to film audiences from the 1930s until his death in 1991. He appeared in over 100 films and in numerous TV shows for many different major studios. He also contributed his voice to radio shows and in animation and acted as a technical advisor on Hollywood films with Chinese themes. At a time when most Asian Americans were cast solely in stereotypical subservient roles, Keye Luke often stood out for playing dignified characters while speaking perfect unaccented English. He couldn't escape the times he lived in though. If you didn't play the parts that the studio system assigned then you simply didn't get to work in Hollywood. He was forced to play his share of stereotypes, but as quoted in the Internet Movie Database said, "I have played so many doctors and characters in the mainstream. Because of my appearance, or because of my personality, or whatever it may be, I was always put into good Boy Scout roles -- lawyers, doctors, business executives and tycoons, the nice Chinese guy down the block."

He was born in Guangzhou, China but grew up in Seattle, Washington. The family of [Wing Luke](#), who grew up to become Washington State's first Asian American elected official, was related to Keye Luke. After graduating from Franklin High School in 1922, he worked as an artist in Seattle for some years then moved to Hollywood as a billboard designer and caricaturist. He painted several murals in Grauman's Chinese Theater when it was being built between 1926 and its opening in 1927.

His start in motion pictures began with a summons in 1934 from the MGM publicity department. He brought his art portfolio along but was told, "We need a Chinese actor who can speak clear English. How would you like to be the assistant to Herbert Marshall, who's fighting cholera in China?" Luke continued, "Then he took me down to the casting department and in his gruff, circus barker's voice, he said, 'Gentlemen, out of China's 400 millions, I give you China's greatest actor.' And there I was, starting out at the top with Greta Garbo and Herbert Marshall in 'The Painted Veil.'"

The contacts he had made as an artist with Hedda Hopper, Louella Parsons, and Jimmie Starr, gave him a huge boost as an actor. In an age where the media was much more centralized and powerful, these entertainment and society columnists could make or break the hopes and dreams of many a Hollywood hopeful or aspiring member of high society with a mention in their nationally syndicated columns or just a word in the right ear. Luke said, "...I had drawn artwork for their newspaper columns -- gave me publicity that opened doors for me. I had advantages money couldn't buy. Only time and circumstance could do those things. Fate distributes its goodies impersonally."

In 1935, Luke was cast in the role that most Americans of that generation remembered him for, that of "Number One Son" in the Charlie Chan series of films starring Warren Oland in yellowface, the practice of whites applying makeup and tape (quite unconvincingly to modern eyes) to appear as Asians, as the namesake Chinese detective. The films were the only breadwinner for the failing Fox Studios that was bought and remade into Twentieth Century Fox that year so it was a star vehicle for Luke. Although Oland portrayed Chan in the stereotypical fashion that made Charlie Chan a byword for Asian stereotyping complete with fortune cookie dialog, Luke's performances portrayed a Chinese man as being perfectly American educated and speaking good English.

Keye Luke also appeared as an intelligent man in the 1937 film, "The Good Earth" as the Elder Son who helps save the day for the Chinese farmers with his intelligence during a locust infestation at the climax of the film. [Anna May Wong](#) by contrast was blocked from playing the lead female role in the film because Hollywood's rules at the time didn't allow for interracial romances, notwithstanding the fact that the white lead actor in yellowface was portraying a Chinese. She famously refused to be cast in the secondary role of the evil concubine in the film telling MGM head of production, Irving Thalberg, "If you let me play O-lan, I will be very glad. But you're asking me – with Chinese blood – to do the only unsympathetic role in the picture featuring an all-American cast portraying Chinese characters."

Luke was cast in the lead detective role in the 1940 film, "Phantom of Chinatown" taking over a role that had been performed by Boris Karloff in yellowface in five previous films. He was the only Asian actor ever cast in a Hollywood picture to receive top billing for portraying an Asian detective during the 1930s and 40s. Whether or not it was a case of audiences or studio buyers unprepared to see the lead role performed by an Asian American or to see an Asian American with a white sidekick the series was canceled. In 1940 he also became the first movie "Kato," sidekick of the "Green Hornet" superhero, whose Japanese nationality from the books and radio series had been mysteriously transformed to Korean for the films. The role would later be famously portrayed by [Bruce Lee](#) for the 1960s TV series.

During World War II Keye Luke made films with such screen legends as Clark Gable and Humphrey Bogart and interestingly enough was never cast as an enemy Japanese as so many Chinese and Asian American actors were at the time. Perhaps having the fondly remembered "Number One Son" play the enemy was just too much for Americans to bear or maybe it was just Keye Luke's winning personality but he ended up playing sympathetic Asian characters allied with the United States.

After the war he continued acting in films including the last two Charlie Chan films in 1948-49 as well as several films in which he was not credited including "Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing" in 1955 and "Around the World in Eighty Days" in 1956. In 1958, he was prominently featured as the family patriarch, Wang Chi-yang, in the hit Broadway stage production of Rogers and Hammerstein musical, "Flower Drum Song." The stage production was a breakthrough in that all the main characters and most of the secondary characters were real Asians portraying Asians in song and dance instead of whites in yellowface holding all the leads as per the usual practice at the time.

From the 1950s onwards, he played many television roles in major network series including Perry Mason, The Andy Griffith Show, General Hospital, Hawaii Five-O, Star Trek, Dragnet 1967, Miami Vice, Remington Steele, Falcon Crest, The A-Team, Trapper John, M.D., Night Court, MacGyver, M\*A\*S\*H, and Golden Girls. His work was so well respected by his peers that he was elected to the Board of Directors of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) which he had helped found.

In 1973, Keye Luke dubbed the lines of Mr. Han, the infamous villain in the [Bruce Lee](#) film, "Enter the Dragon" as Kien Shih didn't speak English. He also served as the narrator at the start of the film. In 1975, Luke became involved in what had once been a [Bruce Lee](#) television project, "Kung Fu" about a Chinese wandering the Old West that eventually starred David Carradine. He portrayed the blind Master Po, the wise Shaolin master that nevertheless managed to see everything anyway. In 1985 he said that this had been the most satisfying role of his career, "I was giving the actual sayings of great Chinese philosophers like Confucius for dialogue. It worked for me on every level."

His last film role was in the 1990 Woody Allen film, "Alice," portraying Dr. Yang, a Chinese American doctor and herbalist, released just before his death in 1991. In an interview with the New York Times he said, "Like Dr. Yang, I am a blending of two cultures. I love the English language. I spoke it from the cradle, and eventually English eclipsed Chinese because all my work was done in a white man's world."

In the same interview he was philosophical about the roles he'd been denied because of race and commented about the struggle of Asian American actors today, "Of course, a Chinese role should be played by a Chinese actor if he can play it. But whether he be blue, black, variegated or magenta, if an actor can make you feel the reality, that person should get the part."

### **External Links:**

<http://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/16/obituaries/keye-luke-actor-is-dead-at-86-no-1-son-and-kung-fu-master.html?scp=11&sq=david%20carradine%20kung%20fu&st=cse>

<http://www.nytimes.com/1990/12/23/movies/film-keye-luke-what-the-doctor-called-for.html?pagewanted=2&src=pm>

<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0525601/>

<http://charliechanfamily.tripod.com/id152.html>

[http://articles.latimes.com/1990-11-29/news/we-7386\\_1\\_hollywood-blvd](http://articles.latimes.com/1990-11-29/news/we-7386_1_hollywood-blvd)