Mr. Yunioshi destined to be classroom topic

Special to The Bee

The fury over the proposed screening and eventual cancellation of "Breakfast at Tiffany's" this weekend is a perfect example of what we call in education a "teachable moment."

As a professor at Sacramento State who teaches courses in Asian American studies, I plan to use the recent events reported in The Bee to generate student discussions on various topics. These include the complex history of negative images of Asians in the media; why some people today still express such strong feelings at the idea of a city-sponsored screening of the film; the role of artistic license and importance of free speech.

Let me first state that I do not think the film "Breakfast at Tiffany's" is racist. It is, in fact, generally a delightful, light-hearted romantic comedy featuring my parents' favorite song, "Moon River." However, the portrayal of Mr. Yunioshi, a regrettable choice for comic relief, degrades the film.

I do not blame Mickey Rooney, but I take offense at the actor's caricature of an Asian man, because I know the ignoble history of negative stereotypical depiction of Asians in Hollywood throughout most of the 20th century, and the Hollywood tradition of having white actors wear grotesque makeup to look "Asian." Using white actors in "yellow face" is as insulting for many Asian Americans as white actors wearing "black face" is for many African Americans.

As offensive as the depiction of Mr. Yunioshi may be, I have no problem with showing it to a class of students so that they can see, think, talk and decide for themselves. Whether or not students agree or come to a consensus are not my end goals. I am much more interested in providing the background necessary to "deconstruct" and make independent, thoughtful decisions.

While the Mr. Yunioshi character is not directly offensive to many people, it is very insulting to others – and there are reasons why. Those who are disgusted with the portrayal of Mr. Yunioshi should analyze why censorship is not an acceptable solution.

The positive result of the "Breakfast at Tiffany's" controversy is the robust discussion created on the streets, in the office, in e-mail messages and on The Bee's Web site. It is clear we have come a long way in terms of overly ugly stereotypical images in the media, but the debate over "Breakfast at Tiffany's" is also a reminder that there is still so much more to accomplish.

A 2006 report, "Asian Pacific Americans in Prime Time: Lights, Camera, No Action," cites the fact that only 13 television programs included a recurring Asian American character. The report goes on to show that in those 13 programs Asian American actors are on screen far less than any other group. In addition, a number of television programs were located in cities such as San Francisco, New York and Seattle without a regular Asian American character. There is visibility, yet still much invisibility of Asian Americans in media.

I am looking forward, as always, to the start of a new semester at Sacramento State. This time I have a new and provocative class exercise that will enhance the educational process. There is no substitute for a real world example to generate active teaching and learning.

Timothy P. Fong is a professor and director of the Asian American Studies Program in the Department of Ethnic Studies at California State University, Sacramento.