Speaking Up For Generic Asians in Charles Yu’s *Interior Chinatown*

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Speaking Up For Generic Asians in Charles Yu’s *Interior Chinatown*

A Thesis by

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I would like to thank my thesis director for her insight and valuable guidance throughout this process.

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ABSTRACT

Speaking Up For Generic Asians in Charles Yu’s Interior Chinatown

by Orel Shilon

In this project, I will explore the ways in which the critical race theory works in conjunction with film and literature to showcase the depths of the racial issues faced by Asian Americans. I will use Charles Yu’s Interior Chinatown as a framework to express the major issues faced by the Asian American community and the concern brought up by implications made within the novel. Scholars such as Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham and their book, Asian Americans and the Media, will be used as a primary source to introduce the problematic ways of the Hollywood establishment. Through the analysis of film such as Crazy Rich Asians and Turning Red, we will see how the increase of representation within Hollywood can mask the stereotypes of Asians and the lack of progress we have made as a society towards racial equality. The ways in which racial representation has been filled throughout films have actually played into racial stereotypes of Asians which further marginalizes this “model minority.” In films such as Crazy, Rich Asians, where the cast is almost entirely Asian and is a seemingly positive step towards inclusivity within Hollywood and America as a whole, Asian stereotypes are put in the spotlight, compounding the continuing discrimination towards Asian Americans. It is explained in Interior Chinatown that these racial representations, then, further contribute to the idea that Asians can never truly be American. Asians are restricted to strict stereotypes like Kung Fu guy, rich foreigners drowning in designers, math nerds, and overly sexualized women. A critical race approach to Interior Chinatown suggests that Asians are confined to these set roles based on laws and acts passed within America throughout its history such as the Chinese Exclusionary Act of 1882. This project will be separated into sections surrounding this topic and will continue to
challenge scholars to introduce the Asian experience in America beyond the scope of the black and white binary— to speak of its intricacies in its own context based on its own history.
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1. Introduction

Whiteness is a social construct that has impacted the way in which we view ourselves as individuals and the way in which we view others. Charles Yu’s *Interior Chinatown* will be used as a framework to express the major issues associated with whiteness regarding the Asian American community. The concerns brought up by implications made within the novel will be contextualized utilizing Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham’s book, *Asian Americans and the Media*. This will help us fully comprehend the race-related issues faced by this community within mainstream text and media. Through the analysis of film and literature such as *Crazy Rich Asians*, Disney’s *Turning Red*, and Mari Matsuda’s *Where Is Your Body?*, we will see how the issues brought up in *Interior Chinatown* have still been prominent in our society today. We will see how the increase of representation within Hollywood can mask the stereotypes of Asians and the lack of progress we have made as a society towards racial equality. The way in which Asian Americans are viewed will be discussed to address the misconceptions and benefits these notable films and such well-known actresses as Constance Wu and Awkwafina, have had on the community’s progress. While some have had a positive influence on this community and others have not, it is important to recognize the impact each of these high-profile films and people has on not only the Asian American community but also the way in which western culture is constructed. In order to advance into a more inclusive society, it is important to dissect the masked issues apparent throughout these cases.
2. **History**

In the 2020 national book award winner, *Interior Chinatown*, Charles Yu introduces the struggles of Asian Americans to offer insight into the workings of the Hollywood establishment. Additionally, it offers historical and legal context to give perspective on the reality of Asians in America. By structuring itself around the social narratives of the law, Asian representation in film can have a broader societal meaning and can give us greater context to the marginalization of Asian Americans. The first law Yu mentions within his novel, is the revision of the constitution in the state of Oregon not to allow a “Chinaman” to own property in 1859. This alien land law was used to prevent and limit the presence and settlement of Asians in America. It was then changed in 1879 to allow only those aliens of “white race or African descent” (231) to own land/property. To put this in perspective, this occurred during the Reconstruction period, fourteen years after enslaved persons were freed by the 13th amendment. This law was made possible because of the Naturalization Act of 1870, which legally granted citizenship rights only to African Americans. It did not include other ethnic groups which allowed states to try and continue a series of alien land laws. These anti-Asian land laws were present, not only in Oregon, but in other Western states such as California and Washington, until 1952 when they were ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court\(^1\).

Unfortunately, laws continued to pass against Chinese Americans which were used to limit their freedom and permanence in America as highlighted by Yu in *Interior Chinatown*. On May 6, 1882, the U.S. Federal Chinese Exclusionary Act was signed by Chester A. Arthur, and it prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers. This was the first law that limited the migration

of a specific and whole ethnic class from entering the country. Ten years later, the Geary Act of
1892 was passed in order to extend the Chinese Exclusionary Act and forced Chinese residents
to carry special documentation with them given by the Internal Revenue Service. “Immigrants
who were caught not carrying the certificates were sentenced to hard labor and deportation, and
bail was only an option if the accused was vouched for by a ‘credible white witness’”
(History.com). Chinese people were not able to receive citizenship in the United States until
1943 when the Magnuson Act was passed. These acts, alongside the other laws passed against
Chinese people in the United States, were used to placate worker demands and uphold the “white
‘racial purity” (History.com). While many of these laws have been ruled unconstitutional, the
effects of these laws and other discriminatory practices are still being borne by Chinese
Americans today, including the ongoing prevalence of racial stereotypes, anti-Asian violence,
discrimination, and systematic discrimination.

*Interior Chinatown* shares the same attitude and approach as critical race theory. Both
integrate discriminatory laws of the United States to emphasize the effect they have had on
marginalized groups. They both emphasize how discriminatory laws have shaped the lives of
people of color in the United States. While Charles Yu discusses laws specific to Chinese
Americans, in conjunction with critical race theory, these sources help to contextualize the main
issues that have developed as a result of these laws (or as a result of the prejudice that the laws
encoded and perpetuated). This includes the generalization of various Asian populations and
cultures. It furthered the marginalization of this minority group and denied the complexity of
each individual Asian culture (due to their shared physical traits). Critical race theory is “a
practice of interrogating the role of race and racism in society that emerged in the legal academy
and spread to other fields of scholarship” (George). It allows us to connect the discriminatory
laws with the livelihood of minorities within the United States, subsequently “[recognizing] that race intersects with other identities, including sexuality, gender identity, and others” (George). Acts such as the U.S. Federal Chinese Exclusionary Act or the Geary Act of 1892 are just a few of the laws that have had an impact on minorities at that time, as well as the generations following that have had to cope with the ramifications like stereotyping and discrimination on the basis of race, gender, class, and sexuality. While Yu primarily focuses on the discrimination faced by Chinese Americans, it does provide implications that can be applied to all Asian Americans which will be contextualized using Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham’s *Asian Americans and the Media: Media and Minorities*. These texts alongside key insights from critical race theory, will provide terms and theoretical framing that will help to explain the negative impact Hollywood has had on the Asian community in America.

3. **Introduction To Charles Yu’s *Interior Chinatown***

Charles Yu’s *Interior Chinatown* takes us through a script-like narrative that focuses on the life of Willis Wu and his desire to make it big in Hollywood as “Kung Fu Guy.” By doing so, Yu is not only able to uncover the exoticization of Chinese people, but he is also able to expose the likely representations of Asians as “inferior” (Yu 251), as well as the experiences of Asians in America, one that is sometimes seen as “a scaled-back or dialed-down version of the Black experience” (Yu 249). The representation of Asians as “inferior” is depicted through the endless list of overgeneralized stereotypes of Asians. For example, Asian people have been referred to as “chinks” to bring attention to the physical features of Asians that don’t match the American beauty standard. While these features can be applied to some or even most Asians, the stereotype itself presents an array of problems that play into Western ideologies and marginalize persons of
Asian descent. Moreover, the overgeneralization of such stereotypes adds to the Asian American experience of underrepresentation in America.

Charles Yu explores this issue through the film industry and its generic roles for Asians such as Generic Asian Man, Background Oriental Man, Egg Roll Cook, Wizened Chinaman, Twin Dragon, and so on. These narratives play into the Hollywood pantheon and transform the way in which our society views Asians—a group of people who become “part of the system… a category” (Yu, 113). Yu’s main character, Willis, finds himself playing into the hierarchy of Asian stereotypes since he is mesmerized by the dazzling dream of stardom and making it big in a superficial role as Kung Fu Guy because “only a very special Asian can be worthy of the title” (Yu, 26). He is entranced by “the hero lighting” (Yu 25), a metaphor for the success attached to a white man’s possibilities in America and the illusory American dream, so he continues to trudge through the demoralizing and dehumanizing roles for an Asian man. All of these roles play into the Asian stereotypes and limit his ability to go beyond the American restrictions placed on him being an Asian man. Instead of being seen as an authentic individual who has much to offer, he is seen as an Asian man, which is his “most salient feature, overshadowing any other feature about [him], making irrelevant any other characteristic” (Yu, 112). Yu tells us that, regardless of the implications made by Hollywood standards and their practices, it was Willis’s dream to be Kung Fu Guy, “ever since [he was] a boy” (Yu, 27) emphasizing the mentality Asian Americans have to attain the American dream or the version of that dream that has been prescribed for them by the dominant culture. It is understood that in America, Asians’ aspirations are limited to generic roles that play into the stereotypes held by white people— it must be their dream to play the typical Asian role within society and do their part to provide to the Hollywood/American ideal.
4. Stereotypes of Chinese Americans

*Interior Chinatown* introduces the stereotypes that are given to Chinese Americans throughout Hollywood and are projected to the rest of society, which “[play] out the same tired old skit, chopsticks and dragons, Family and Duty, Father and Son” (Yu 278). While these stereotypes can be true to some extent, representing aspects of some Asian Americans, they are overgeneralized cliches that negatively impact the lives of Chinese Americans and the progression of American society away from racism and discrimination. In Liz Ohanesian’s article “Charles Yu’s ‘Interior Chinatown’ busts TV stereotypes to explore Asian immigration and representation,” she explains Yu’s idea that television portrays stereotypes to “reflect a somewhat distorted and oversimplified view of race relations, of racial groups and of how people actually live their lives… There tends to be this exoticization or flattening of whole groups. It doesn’t just apply ethnically, but in terms of gender and sexuality.” We have seen this throughout Yu’s novel in which he allots specific roles to Asian actors or actresses to convey the “exoticization or flattening of whole groups” (Ohanesian). Yu furthers his point by showing the limited roles that Asians, specifically those of Chinese descent, have had within Hollywood. The highest, most fulfilling role is that of Kung Fu guy, a very stereotypical Chinese role, and any other roles they may receive are as virtual props or background characters. They are given generalized roles that match the stereotypes of Chinese Americans. These generalized and minor roles throughout Hollywood for Chinese Americans perpetuate the invisibility of a whole and complex race.

Yu explains that roles are assigned to Chinese Americans based on their physical traits, occupations, and what matches an American image of a Chinese American. He introduces Kung
Fu guy, restaurant owner, oriental man, and dead guy. Each of these roles plays into the Chinese persona curated by western culture, specifically by Hollywood. Additionally, each plays into a stereotype that encourages viewers to overlook and neglect the Chinese American community.

Kung Fu guy, a prominent figure within Hollywood and the “terminal, ultimate, exalted position for any Asian working in this world” (26), represents “all the scrawny yellow boys’” (26) dream. This character encompasses what is believed to be the epitome of the Chinese American and the pinnacle of the roles available to the Chinese community within Hollywood. Within Interior Chinatown, it is clear that for Willis, as well as the other Asian actors, this is the most honorable and promising role an actor can receive. However, in her book review titled “Transcending ‘Kung Fu Guy,’” Taylor Moore explains that the “ultimate goal of playing Kung Fu Guy, the pinnacle of Asian cinema, is just out of reach” (Moore). This role is very limited, not only for Willis, but for all, as it “takes years of sacrifice… [and] only a few have even a slim chance” (26). The selectiveness in its choice of actor leaves Asian Americans with background roles such as oriental man or restaurant owner. Therefore, Hollywood has created a system in which it not only utilizes Asian Americans as mere background characters or props to further their values, beliefs, and behaviors towards this community but also influences the way in which Asian Americans are set to carry out their everyday lives. The way that the Hollywood hierarchy is set up does not allow Chinese Americans, much less Asian Americans, from going beyond a set role or set type of success. The roles provided to Chinese Americans are pivotal in the ways we view Asians and the boundaries that are set for this community. Hollywood has created a pyramid scheme-like system that encompasses the western label of Asian Americans: Kung Fu guy, restaurant owner, math nerds, gangsters, rich foreigners, etc.. This role, especially Kung Fu guy, offers a chance at acceptance by and inclusion in white America— it is plagued by a desire
towards whiteness and acceptance into mainstream western culture and ideologies. Staying true to these roles are meaningful because it adheres to a white man’s beliefs of the Asian man. It plays into the stereotypes offered towards the Asian man and is masked by an enticing chance at stardom and a chance at “living among the mainstream, which everyone knows means whites” (165). This particular role along with the other stereotypical roles assigned to Asian Americans are limiting because it continues the cycle of Asian stereotypes, generalizing this community and taking for granted their individual complexities.

Prominent throughout the novel, the role of Kung Fu has had countless renditions of this played-out stereotype throughout the many years in Hollywood– from Karate Kid (2010) to Fist of Fury (1972) to Enter the Dragon (1973) to Marvel’s Shang Chi (2021). The continuation of this role, while somewhat encouraging to Asian Americans for its seemingly inclusive behavior– due to its celebration by white American audiences– allows western society to box in Chinese Americans to a confined part of the Asian narrative Hollywood wishes to portray. Yu mentions similar roles in Interior Chinatown to serve the same purpose of assimilating Chinese Americans into western culture such as “dead guy”.

With the role of dead guy, Yu tells us in the novel that it is the grunt work– the role that one must play in order to hopefully become Kung Fu guy. In the grand scheme of things, however, this role is how Hollywood takes advantage of this minority group. It creates very plain and superficial roles to fill a racial quota. These minor roles then act as a filler within television shows and films to fill both a quota and an adherence to the set roles assigned to the minority. To further this idea, Yu introduces the rule for Asian TV guest stars and background actors: If your character gets killed, you can’t appear on the same show for a period of 45 days, which is “just long enough for everyone to forget you existed” (Ohanesian). Since the majority of the roles
given to Chinese Americans within Hollywood are arguably trivial ones, this plays into Chinese Americans' invisibility and use as props or background characters within American society. Not until recently have Chinese Americans been represented more frequently as the main characters within television series, films, or novels. However, with this recent increase in representation, in literature and films such as *Crazy Rich Asians*, the standard stereotypes that Yu anatomizes in *Interior Chinatown* and that have impacted Asian Americans are becoming less and less evident.

5. *Crazy Rich Asians*

In 2013, the author, Kevin Kwan, released his novel, *Crazy Rich Asians*. This novel focuses on Rachel Chu, a NYU professor of economics, who is dating the son of one of the richest families in Asia, Nicholas (Nick) Young. Throughout the novel, Nick’s family looks at Rachel with disapproval because of her familial and economic status. This leads to the climax of the novel in which Rachel breaks up with Nick and plans on meeting her imprisoned father instead. In the end, Nick reconciles with Rachel, leading us to the second novel of the trilogy. Kwan’s novel created a solid foundation for the American director, Jon M. Chu, to create a film that encompasses the novel while expanding the limitations for Asian Americans within Hollywood. However, as empowering as it was to see an almost entirely Asian cast— which has not been seen in any major American studio film since *The Joy Luck Club* in 1993— stereotypes of Asian Americans, although discreet, were prominent throughout the film and “while many speak of the legitimate importance of seeing people who look like themselves on-screen, the investment in *mainstream* depictions in particular… implies a preoccupation with not only (or even primarily) how Asian Americans see ourselves, but also how others see us” (Tseng-
Putterman). This film played into the exoticization of Asians due to the perception western society has of the exuberant and lavish lifestyle associated with Asian foreigners. While true for a small percentage of Asians, this theatrical and luxurious lifestyle limits our perception of the reality of the majority of the Asian community. In his article, “One Way That Crazy Rich Asians is a Step Backwards”, Mark Tseng Putterman reflects on the extravagance played out in this film noting how it “enacts a remarkable disavowal of certain forms of Asian representation” and places an emphasis on an “almost ornamental…westernized story” (Tseng-Putterman). Tseng-Putterman raises questions regarding the “right” and “wrong” type of Asians to supplement the idea of Crazy Rich Asians being a white, American movie that is limiting in the pursuit of “transcending race” (Tseng-Putterman). The author utilizes a scene between Rachel Chu and Nick Young’s cousin to introduce this concept:

In one notable scene, Goh Wye Mun (Ken Jeong) plays up an affected Chinese accent, repeating Rachel’s surname until it devolves into a parody of the “ching-chong” stereotypes of Hollywood’s past. Then, the payoff: “Just kidding,” Wye Mun says in an assuredly American accent: “I went to Cal State Fullerton.” The scene stands in for the prevailing spirit of the film: We’re not those kinds of Asians. (Tseng-Putterman)

The idea of the “right” and “wrong” kinds of Asians are brought up in this article which allows us to understand the detriments stereotyping can have. It is assumed within the article that the “right” types of Asians are those who adhere to white standards and practices, while the “wrong” types of Asians are those who abide by their own culture and cultural practices. In this specific scene, Asian accents and language are attacked which separates and enhances the appeal toward whiteness. In “We Will Not Be Used”, Mari Matsuda explains that the Asian “accents and language are considered threats to the American way” (Matsuda 166). The idea of Asianness is seen as wrong to western society, so adherence to Asian culture and cultural practices are condemned. When introduced to a film that highlights American aspirations (an extravagance
that mimics that of *The Great Gatsby*) and faithfulness towards western cultural standards and ideologies, including the perception of Asians, it is expected that the conformity towards western practices will remain unchallenged.

Tseng-Putterson argues that *Crazy Rich Asians* is inherently a white film appealing to white standards masked with an all-Asian cast. The director of this film, Jon M. Chu, even states in an interview with Jenna Marotta, that the vision and purpose of this movie were to prove that “old, classic, Hollywood movies could have starred Asians with just as much style, just as much pizzazz” (Chu in Marotta interview). It is no surprise then that this film does not innately challenge the western ideologies and stereotypes attached to Asians and Asian Americans. Instead, it feeds into them because it is “confined to a politics of respectability, [since calling] for diversity in the mainstream often ends up not representing difference and complexity, but proving sameness” (Tseng-Putterson). By doing so, this film expands whiteness, highlighting the conformity to white standards and its implied default status as the cultural norm.

Chu is able to show white-Asian equivalency because his film embraces the “right” type of Asians, those who have assimilated into western culture, implicitly marginalizing the “wrong” type of Asians, those who pursue their own culture and cultural practices. At the beginning of the film, Elanor Young, played by Michelle Yeoh, flaunts her wealth and status by purchasing an entire hotel after being rudely disrespected by the white hotel manager. Superficially, this scene feels like a win for the Asian community—a diss towards the omnipotent whites. However, by adhering to white standards of class, wealth, and reputability, this scene suggests to viewers that the “right” type of Asians follow a certain kind of white hegemony that epitomizes assimilation toward western culture and an acceptance into white society.
Additionally, this scene suggests that there is an overlap between ethnic groups and their subsequent class, interconnecting the relationship between a class-based hierarchy and a racial hierarchy. Within the film, the representation of Asian Americans is slim, as it only presents a minute portion of the demographic in Singapore, despite the diverse population of Asians it homes. Many might not even notice the lack of representation of various Asians within the film; however, this can be problematic when it is constructed or marketed to be a groundbreaking, all Asian-inclusive film and “a landmark victory in the fight for Asian American visibility in Hollywood” (Tseng-Putterman). While it is not outwardly stated, one can presume that Eleanor Young is of Chinese descent based on Singapore’s demographics as well as the cultural references within the novel and film. Thus when Young, a Chinese Singaporean-born woman, disrupts the white-owned establishment, her class (top 1%) and her race (though she is born in Singapore, she is of Chinese descent) become comparable to the white standard, creating an equivalency and acceptance between whites and the “right” type of Asians. Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham argue in *Asian Americans and the Media* that “those who produce the media make particular kinds of choices about whom to hire as actors, what narratives it makes sense for those characters to appear in, how characters represent race and ethnicity, how audiences are invited to respond to characters, which audiences might watch their productions, and what particular meanings might be created through all these choices” (Ono, Vincent 8). Knowing that there is a particular narrative they are trying to achieve begs the question of the image of Asians and Asian Americans they were trying to portray. This could mean that this film was to show either “a universalism that “transcends race” [or] a specificity that reflects Asian and Asian American lived experiences” (Tseng-Putterman). Since it has its limitations with Asian
representation and mimics that of a western story, it leans towards the former, therefore, this film can be a nod toward the “right” and “wrong” type of Asians.

*Crazy Rich Asians* continues to isolate the types of Asians by explicating the forfeiture of Southeast Asians from the Asian narrative in America. Within *Crazy Rich Asians*, the film disregards and diminishes the importance of various nationalities. Tseng-Putterson argues:

While the cast includes a mix of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean diaspora actors of various nationalities, besides Golding (who is of Iban descent) it effectively excludes South and Southeast Asians despite their deep presence in Singaporean society. Indeed, as many have pointed out, the only South Asians that viewers can glimpse are in the roles of servants and guards. The scene in which Rachel and Peik Lin drive up to the Youngs’ remote estate and are shocked by the sight of two turbaned, South Asian guards—armed with what appear to be bayonets, no less—seems a particularly apt metaphor for the brand of Asian American representation *Crazy Rich Asians* provides: one in which too many are left on the outside, looking in.

The film's inclusion of the Southeast Asian guards felt forced and seemed to place them in a position below the “right” and “acceptable” East Asians. Although Southeast Asians account for 8.58% of the total world population, which is around 680 million people\(^2\), they are shunned as the “wrong” type of Asian within the Asian narrative and are reduced to very minor roles, such as a servant or guard, even in today’s seemingly inclusive society. Based on these roles, there seems to be an interconnection between the class and racial hierarchy, suggesting, in this case, that Southeast Asians are found at the bottom. While it is difficult for a film to represent multiple different groups and communities, the title of this film suggests it is inclusive in its panorama of Asian communities. By reducing Southeast Asians to very minor roles in a large production that claims inclusion further marginalizes Southeast Asians creating an outsider mentality and builds

\(^2\) “South-Eastern Asia Population (Live).” *Worldometer*, https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/south-eastern-asia-population/#:~:text=South%2DEastern%20Asia%20population%20is,of%20the%20total%20world%20population.
on the idea that in order to be accepted, one must conform to white standards. The glamorizing of East Asians and the low-level positions held by Southeast Asians within the film support the commentary on the admissible Asian.

6. Constance Wu

Charles Yu’s hierarchy of roles in Hollywood for Chinese Americans is a good framework for examining the notable actress, Constance Wu. Her presence in the film, Crazy Rich Asians, as well as her role as an overbearing, tiger mom in the television series, Fresh Off The Boat, and as a stripper in the film, Hustlers, provides context to the pitfalls of following stereotypes.


Constance Wu’s role in Crazy Rich Asians may be one of her most progressive roles for the Asian American community. Contrary to the issues within the film, her role resists the typical Asian woman stereotype. Gender, race, and sexuality all play a role in “an interlinked system of representation that helps describe and define who has power in relationship to others” (Ono, Pham 65). Wu’s success in debunking the Asian woman trope is a huge step in the right direction for the progression in both race and gender within the Asian community. She plays Rachel Chu, a NYU economics professor and the love interest of Nicholas Young. Her character is feisty and forthright, smart and strong-willed, which changes the timid and shy cliche of Asian women. While Asian women have been marked as “aesthetically pleasing, sexually willing and speechless” as well as “exotic and enticing” (Kang, 75), Constance Wu’s character paves the way for a different role for Asian women. As she is challenged by Eleanor Young and her conquest to break her and Nick apart, she shows a formidable front that not only gains the
respect of Eleanor Young herself, but also the audience viewing the film. Regardless of being faced with bullying, constant demoralizing comments, and having her worth and value continuously questioned throughout the film, her character maturely fights back, conquering the yielding Asian woman trope. In the Observer article, “Crazy Rich Asians Tries to Debunk Stereotypes—And Mostly Succeeds”, the author, Chiu-Ti Jansen, argues that the “reinterpretation of the character may read like a calculated response to a call for better, more complex portrayals of women in movies, but regardless of its intentions, Crazy Rich Asians effectively subverts the stereotype of the submissive Asian woman, and Wu delivers a convincing performance as Chu, a West Village intellectual with a glamorous sparkle” (Jansen). Constance Wu delivers a stellar performance that pushes past the gender and racial stereotypes associated with Asian women, subsequently showing viewers that it is possible to break past what Yu described as “Ethnic Recurring” (193)—a role “that is handed to you, written for Asian [women]” (197).

6.2. Fresh Off The Boat

While Wu has shown promise in her recent role as Rachel Chu, her role in the American sitcom, Fresh Off The Boat, creates a narrative matching the stereotypes linked to Asians and Asian Americans. The television series follows Eddie Huang, the eldest of three boys, who struggles to find grounding in his new school and even among his culturally bound family. This show was inspired by the memoir written by Eddie Huang. Wu plays Jessica Huang, his strict helicopter mom that admires the “tough love” upbringing. She is competitive and does whatever she can to ensure the success of her husband and children. Though this television show is satirical in nature, her character falls in line with the Asian mother trope, one who stays true to
the Asian culture and always pushes their children or significant other to succeed at whatever cost.

This show had much promise as it was the first Asian-led sitcom since the series *All American Girl*, however, it was very prejudiced and clung to many of the stereotypes held against Asians and Asian Americans. When released, the show received a lot of backlash due to the “racist nature of the title and its reliance on stereotypes, such as the parent’s accents and Jessica’s tiger-mom tendencies” (LaMay). Eddie Huang even walked away from the project because he felt that it resembled “moo goo gai pan” and was extremely disappointed that ABC failed to include issues of domestic violence within Asian-American households that were an important part of his memoir. The show no longer became recognizable and failed to capture the Asian American experience. Huang continued to point out its flaws after denouncing the television show saying “I had to say something because I stood by the pilot. After that it got so far from the truth that I don't recognize my own life” (Huang). It became clear that this show was no longer representing the perils of the Asian-American lifestyle and was instead, playing into the western ideologies held by Asians and Asian Americans. Many, including Huang, were distraught by the insincerity when creating a series that was meant to be a huge step towards a more inclusive society. Unfortunately, the show failed to produce content that allowed the Asian community to “see a reflection of themselves” (Huang). The image that was produced because of this sitcom, instead, influenced and reinforced the existing one-dimensional stereotypes of this group of people, and contributed to a discrepancy between the series and reality. These criticisms caused both viewers and critics to have a “general distrust of the show for inaccurately depicting, or ignoring altogether, the real struggles of Asian-American families” (LaMay). While this show does show the struggle many Asian-American families face— that is, struggling to find
footing in a white-dominated place—this message is overshadowed by the overused racist banter, such as “Ying Ding’s eating worms” or “You’re at the bottom now… chink”, that strengthens the stereotypes Asians and Asian Americans have been trying to weaken.

Constance Wu’s role in this show has added to the negative impact this show has had on the stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans. Wu’s character builds on the existing tropes of Asian mothers and advertises these to her audience. The danger in this is that, while many can argue that this show is sarcastic in nature, this show does rely heavily on racist remarks and overdone Asian cliches. The reliance on these two elements, according to Ono and Pham, “are not determinative, [but] may still have a controlling social power” (Ono, Pham 9). Thus, instead of being a light-hearted comedy that introduces issues of hardship, self-discovery, and growth, it alternatively enforces the existing stereotypes held by the dominant race.

6.3. Hustlers

In addition to Fresh Off The Boat, Constance Wu makes an appearance in the 2019 movie, Hustlers, which expands on the over-sexualization of women, specifically this stereotype associated with Asian women. This film follows Destiny, played by Constance Wu, and Ramona, played by Jennifer Lopez, two strippers who devise a scheme to meet ends meet (and eventually much more) by manipulating Wall Street clientele. They would drug their high-end clients and max out their credit cards to make money for the strip club while keeping a substantial commission. While many viewers and critics rave about this film for “sticking it to the man” and breaking away from the stereotypes of oversexualized and objectified women, this film, much like Crazy Rich Asians, perpetuates harmful stereotypes that are partially masked by female characters who are “[framed] as Robin Hood types, doing what they had to do in a broken
This film, however, is replete with racial and gender ideologies that make this film and the characters in it lacking in authority in progressing away from damaging stereotypes.

There are different variations of representations of women that can be problematic on many different levels. For Asian women, the overarching “ambivalent dialectic,” according to Ono and Pham, is “two contrasting portraits that appear to be opposite but in fact function together to represent women in problematic ways” (Ono, Pham 66), namely that of the Lotus Blossom and the Dragon Lady. Within *Hustlers*, Constance Wu portrays the Dragon Lady, “who is sinister and surreptitious and often functions as a feminized version of yellow peril (discourse that does not take into account ethnic, cultural, political, historical, or social differences, specific towards Asian Americans)” (Ono, Pham 66). The Dragon Lady is often referred to as “untrustworthy, deceitful, conniving, and plotting, and she may use sex or sexuality to get what she wants, including the object of her sexual desire” (Ono, Pham 66). Within the film, Wu’s character must rely on her duplicitous nature to gain the white male’s attention in order to attain what she truly desires (being financially stable and doing so by targeting those that they believe deserve it). While her character utilizes her sexuality to gain power, she subsequently constructs a connection between the white male suitor and the women’s non-agency—her inability to succeed based on her own will. While her character does not use her sex appeal to gain her sexual desire, the Dragon Lady trope becomes prevalent throughout the film when she uses her sexuality to manipulate her Wall Street clientelle into inadvertently financing her life. This, that reveals her very untrustworthy and conniving nature is what furthers this stereotype and shows the true nature of this film. Wu’s character then becomes another personified version of the
played-out Dragon Lady representation and thus reveals the true and unfortunate reality of Asian American female representation in the media.

This film supposedly empowers women and shows the “true hardships of women” (Howard). However, this film has women parading around in little to no clothing, which becomes the focus of the film. It tells us that the use of sex appeal is the only way women can gain power. Brinley Zoller expands on these issues within the film:

Since *Hustlers* is based on a true story the roles and plot were non-negotiable, but it's interesting that one of the few films released about women minorities and portrays them as overly sexualized convicts is a film that does great at the box office. The message in the film then seems to imply that women are only going to succeed in films as thieves and not because they possess authority, but because they are sexy and are willing to use that trait to their advantage. Another film with a similar narrative also received a similar reception – *Oceans 8* (dir. Gary Ross, 2018). The cast is mainly women, who also are pop-culture icons such as: Rihanna, Anna Hathaway, and Sandra Bullock. These women may be clever, but they still have to sexualize their bodies quite frequently to dumbfound the male impediments. The symbolic meaning for the two films is that no matter how brilliant or powerful a female is, she will always have to objectify herself to a man in order to succeed. (Zoller)

The film normalizes the sexual objectification of woman and uses that as a way to show their so-called “power.” The movie seems to convey that their power is only gained through female sex appeal, which is looked at through the male gaze. Viewing women as their sex and sexual appeal positions women as the object in the male’s desire. The women in this film reduce themselves to objects of sexual pleasure and gratification in order to obtain their financial stability. It appears, then, that the male gaze is what constitutes a woman’s ability to gain authority— it is the male’s gaze that determines whether or not a woman is sexually desirable enough to gain that power over a man. This is apparent when Destiny, Ramona, and their crew are entertaining one of their wealthy Wall Street clientele. Because of their physical appearance, they are able to distract the man long enough to spike his drink with various drugs. This allows the group to bring him to the
strip club and continuously charge his credit card. Even though the women think they have gained autonomy against their male counterparts, they are still viewed as less than because they were still treated as objects of desire. Their plan would not have worked had the white Wall Street men not given his approval of their physical appearance. These women had to reduce themselves to their sex appeal in order to gain power over their white male clientele. They are seen as their body— their sexualized body— and not as the savvy and independent women that they are. While many may think that this film is a strategic step towards gender and racial equality because of its diverse and, to a great degree, female cast, this film actually reinforces white supremacist ideologies of gender and racial roles using a niche and overtly sexual group of people to disguise it.

The stereotypes introduced in both *Interior Chinatown*, *Crazy Rich Asians*, and by the various roles played by the actress, Constance Wu, provide support for the idea that America is still limited in its progress away from a racial hierarchy and towards acceptance of various minorities and their cultural intricacies. These narratives show us how Hollywood can mislead us into believing that there has been progress in its representations of race and gender. They detail the intersections between class, gender, race, and sexuality that build the stereotypes we are aware of today, which raises questions regarding the issues associated with categorizing groups of people into vague and loose-fitting generalizations within films and media.
7. **What it Tells Us/Fails to Tell Us About Asian Americans**

Understanding that there is a discrepancy between the one-dimensional stereotypes designated for Asian Americans and the reality of this community can show us how lacking the Hollywood world is in terms of diversity and growth. Since Hollywood provides us with so much information—whether it be accurate or distorted—it can create an “illusion that we have access to all the information we could ever possibly want—we may be lured into believing we know other people, know what they feel, understand what matters to them, and therefore can imagine how they live” (Ono, Pham 4). Since films can dictate the way we view a person, it is important to realize how they can also affect the way we view a group of people. In the essay, “Multicultural Redemption: *Crazy Rich Asians* and the Politics of Representation,” Corinne Mitsuye Sugino explains that “it is no wonder, then, that films like *Crazy Rich Asians, Black Panther,* and *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* are celebrated for their diversity, insofar as they merely involve the inclusion of diverse faces while conditioning audiences to reinvest hope in the same power dynamics that have historically marginalized them” (Sugino). Much like the issues faced among other minority groups, “white supremacy… persists under the auspices of liberal multiculturalism which produces the illusion of progress while maintaining conditions of domination” (Sugino). In this respect, then, the Asian faces we see scattered throughout the entirety of *Crazy Rich Asians* may seem great—empowering even—however, when the film fixates on ideals that the majority of the Asian community cannot relate to, the specificities of their race that plays into making them feel unsuitable in white society, or limits them in their potential to achieve beyond designated roles, this can be taxing on their community. It can instead show viewers how we are supposed to judge these groups of people and how they are supposed to be seen in comparison to whites. Unfortunately for the Asian community, they have
been grouped together as one whole entity instead of being seen as a totality of various different cultures and cultural practices. Yu shows us how this can be problematic after one of Willis Wu’s roommates gets beaten up for being Asian and looking like a “Jap” after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

All of the housemates realize: it was them. All of them. That was the point. They are all the same. All the same to people who struck Allen in the head until his eye swelled shut. All the same as they filled a large sack with batteries and stones, and hit Allen in the stomach with it until blood came up from his throat. Allen was Wu and Park and Kim and Nakamoto, and they were all Allen. Japan, China, Taiwan, Korea, Vietnam. Whatever. Anywhere over there. Slope. Jap. Nip. Chink. Towelhead. Whatever. All of them in the house, after that, they should become closer. But they don’t. They don’t sit around the table anymore, comparing names. Because now they know what they are. Will always be. Asian Man. (164)

Instead of being viewed as an individual– someone who is complex, different, remarkable in their own way, and not like any other Asian– Hollywood has created a particular view of Asian Americans that not only affects them mentally (how they view themselves, how others view them, and how they see their projected growth within western society) but also physically (as we have seen in countless Asian hate crimes that have “increased [by] 339 percent nationwide last year” in 2021). While this increase in hate crimes have been, in part, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the image Hollywood has placed on Asian Americans has had an effect on the way we perceive this racial minority and thus, how they have been physically affected within this country. Regardless of the increased presence of Asian actors/actresses in Hollywood, the adherence to Hollywood expectations of whiteness and Western society in films creates doubt regarding the community’s progress.
8. Why Asian Americans Are Never Truly Seen As American

*Interior Chinatown* opens up the discussion regarding the reality of Asian Americans’ progress within America. Yu explains that there is still a discrepancy between the way in which Asian Americans are viewed in America— they are viewed as their stereotypes, whether that be Kung Fu Guy, the Dragon Lady, the Oriental Man, and so on. Within the novel, Willis Wu explains his time in the Int. Chinatown SRO (single room occupancy) which leads him to the discussion of being unwelcome within the states. He states:

The idea was you came here, your parents and their parents and their parents, and you always seem to have just arrived and yet never seem to have actually arrived. You’re here, supposedly, in a new land full of opportunity, but somehow have gotten trapped in a pretend version of the old country. (74)

Here, Willis proposes the feeling of separation from American culture even though he has done everything within the confines of American guidelines. He realizes that no matter how long Asians have been part of American society they will always be “guilty of wanting to be part of something that never wanted [them]” (253). Playing into Western stereotypes of Asian Americans offered a mirage of glamorous, Hollywood success. It was, instead, a way that kept them segregated from the rest of America— they are still placed on the outside as foreigners while fulfilling these roles. Despite the fact that they are not fully accepted within America, they are used for their strong work ethic and perseverance as “model minorities” and are placed on a pedestal (in comparison to other diverse minorities within the United States) to act “appealing and acceptable, [to] be what they want to see” (253) as a reference group to outgroups (other minorities). Yu explains that an Asian man must “give [white America] what they feel is right, is safe” because it has “always been, from the very beginning, a construction, a performance of features, gestures, culture, and exoticism. An invention, a reinvention, a stylization” (252). It was
a way in which Asian Americans, as model minorities, were taken advantage of in order to maintain the racial hierarchy.

The term, model minority, appeared in the 1960s amid protests for civil rights, educational equality, and social justice. Asian Americans became known as model minorities throughout mainstream media because of their arguable (due to its limitations) success in Western society. This created a separation between Asian Americans and other minorities because this discourse “constructed Asian Americans as racially exceptional yet not of the mainstream and suggested that they need no social services or federal support, in contrast to other racial minorities” (Ono, Pham 80). Their success in America was highlighted and even praised, but created a threat to the nation that forced “every wave, every new boatload of Asians, [to be as] fresh, as alien to this land as the first” (251). Thus, in order for the state and larger society to protect its hegemonic class of white Americans, it had to create a separation between whiteness and minorities through “[masked] racist policies, attitudes, and representations by alternating between admiration for and fear of Asians and Asian Americans” (Ono, Pham 81). The idea of the ‘model minority’ served as a way to “[drive] a political wedge in between racially disadvantaged groups and undermine legitimate struggles, activism, and legislation for social justice by describing the “model” minority as one who is quiet, hardworking, stays out of trouble, listens to elders, and takes upon themselves the responsibility for change rather than assigning blame and advocating for social change to the government” (Ono, Pham 80). By creating a hierarchy of races within the nation, white Americans are able to maintain their power and create a racially ambivalent discourse regarding various minorities including Asian Americans.
The model minority construct limited Asian Americans in their success within Western society even as it threatened Eurocentric standards, placing them as lesser than their white counterparts, but greater than their various minority peers. In combination with the problematic stereotypes, the model minority title created a sense of lack of belonging within the Asian American community which gave rise to never allowing Asians to be seen as fully American. These issues then play into the separation between one racial minority and another, specifically in relation to Asian Americans and other minoritized groups. However, it is important to realize the pitfalls of segregating one community from another. As John C. Yang, the president and executive director of the nonprofit civil rights group Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAJC), states in an interview for the news report, “Anti-Asian hate crimes increased 339 percent nationwide last year, report: “Especially during a time when groups are trying to divide and pit vulnerable communities against each other, we must remember that we are stronger together” (Yang, quoted by Yam). He refers to other minority groups who have experienced hate crimes or have experienced microaggressions such as, but not limited to, the LGBTQ+ community, and all of “our diverse communities” (Yang, quoted by Yam) including the African American community. It is crucial to come together and support one another in the fight for equality and life beyond generic, overplayed stereotypes; however, this news report introduces a debate that Charles Yu includes within Interior Chinatown regarding the inclusion of the Black/White binary within the conversation geared towards Asian Americans.
9. **Black/White Binary and its Relation to the Asian American Discourse**

The Black/White binary within the United States has been prevalent throughout its history and is a model for how other minority groups are treated within the country. While the African American race problem serves as a basis for discussion regarding racial issues in America, it raises the question of whether or not it is necessary to include the Black/White binary within the conversation of Asian American racial issues within the States. Such questions include: Is it possible to speak of the Asian experience without including/talking about the African American experience? Does including African American race-related issues in the Asian American race-related conversation impact the way we view this community? Will including it change the gravity of its equally significant counterpart? If included, how will its addition to the conversation bring about positive progression within the community?

Charles Yu introduces the show *Black and White* within *Interior Chinatown* to incorporate the black/white binary and explicate the impact of its inclusion or exclusion within the Asian American conversation. This show is a reference to the legal drama television series, *Law and Order*, and is used to show Willis’ progression (or lack thereof) within Hollywood. Black and White is used to introduce not only an Asian man’s role in Hollywood, but is also used to explore the black and white person’s narrative “that has been scripted for them” (Yu in Tan). Yu utilizes this fictional television series to raise these questions regarding the Black/White binary and its place within Asian American discourse.

The Black/White discourse offers fundamental issues with the white supremacy construct. It helps to show the role Asian Americans play as model minorities and how that can negatively impact another racial minority.
A consideration of African American discourse, specifically with the act of blackface in America, can help us understand why it may be beneficial to consider issues of Black representation within the Asian American conversation of race relations. Blackface grew in popularity within the United States after the Civil War when whites would dress up as African Americans and literally paint their body black to dehumanize and degrade African Americans. Some scholars maintain that blackface became a vehicle for assimilation for certain white ethnic groups because it provided a clear discrepancy between the two races and provided social mobility for whites through the entertainment industry. Blackface was used as a means to an end, consequently taking advantage of a racial minority in order to foster success. The success garnered by partaking in blackface became a way to promote and extend the grasp of white supremacy. By parading in a racist caricature, performers participated in devaluing and segregating the African American community, “[underwriting] a white supremacist impulse that metastasized into every aspect of American life” (Staples). Since Asian Americans have been romanticized as model minorities and allegedly aligned with white people, have similar performances of blackness paved the way for Asian American success and assimilation? Crazy Rich Asian’s actress, Awkwafina, was scrutinized for her performance of what is arguably a modern-day version of blackface.

Mark Tseng-Putterman in The Atlantic article argues that Awkwafina’s “blaccent” in Crazy Rich Asians promotes the marginalization of African Americans and strengthens the relationship between whites and Asian Americans:

“Awkwafina’s on-and-off ‘blaccent’ as Peik Lin stands out in a film light on Asian accents, especially ‘Singlish’ Singaporean ones. In a world of upper-crust East Asians, Lum’s approximation of the ‘sassy black friend’ trope exploits blackness for cheap laughs—implicitly aligning Asians (or at least the crazy-rich ones) with white people. Indeed, in a political climate in which Asian Americans
are often leveraged as a minority ‘wedge’ on racial-justice issues, the film at times confirms rather than dislodges troubling conservative American aspirations toward a white-Asian alliance.”

While this film partakes in actions that limit the progress of the Asian American community, it is a stretch to fault Awkwafina for the way she speaks. Putterman bases his argument on the assumption that Awkwafina utilizes her “blaccent” to separate herself, as an Asian woman, from black people, in order to appeal to white people. What Putterman fails to consider is the origin of the actress’ accent. Accents and dialogue are based on location—phrases, words, pronunciations, etc.. will vary depending on where you are in the world. Awkwafina is born and raised in Queens, New York, a place that is known for its non-rhoticity (r-lessness) and low back merger (cot-caught merger; when speakers do not pronounce the vowel phonemes). The Queens accent is heavily influenced by its majority foreign percentage (around 48%). Thus, the accusations held against Awkwafina for her supposed “modern-day blackface” seem to ignore the more pressing issue they are partaking in: presupposing the actions of Asian Americans as ways to further their own individual success while aligning themselves with their white counterparts. Furthermore, the focus is shifted once again from Asian American discourse into a conversation about the model minority and its effect on the Black experience, minimizing and devaluing Asian Americans’ own fight for social justice.

Focus on the Black/White binary can erase issues faced by Asian Americans. Yu makes a point within the novel regarding the Black/White discussion arguing that an Asian’s “oppression because it does include the original American sign-of slavery— that it will never add up to something equivalent. That the wrongs against your ancestors are incommensurate in magnitude

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4 “Queens County, NY.” Data USA, https://datausa.io/profile/geo/queens-county-ny.
with those committed against Black people in America” (247). This feeling associated with not feeling worthy of conversation is only heightened with the addition of the Black/White binary discourse in Asian American dialogue.

Moreover, Yu looks toward both historical and legal concepts that have outlined the position of both racial minorities. While on the television show within the novel, *Black and White*, Willis Wu is put on trial for his own disappearance from the series, and for being a “weenie” who “thinks he can’t participate in this race dialogue because Asians haven’t been persecuted as much as Black people” (240). His lawyer, Older Brother, tries to defend him and explain the reasoning behind Willis’ disappearance. In the end, the prosecution, who represented the People (the community), remained victorious while Willis Wu continued to be a “perpetual foreigner” (252). His guilty charge seemed to represent the lose-lose situation Asian Americans consistently find themselves in:

The legitimacy of categorizing “Asiatics” in such a way as to justify lumping them into the clause ‘Blacks and Indians’ (in order to deny them the right to testify against Whites) is based on the subjective state of mind of a single man (Christopher Columbus) at a particular historical moment hundreds of years ago, who at that moment happened to be spectacularly and egregiously mistaken about where on the globe he had drifted into; thus a navigational misunderstanding of the word itself becomes the justification for a legally binding category… the effect of this is that we have codified with the force of law a category: Black and Asians, separating them (because obviously, creating a new category of non-White), a secondary effect is that it also codifies Asiatics as outside the Black category. Inferior, and yet not in the same way Blacks were considered inferior (250-51).

Yu explains that Asians and their subsequent racial struggles in the States are seen as lesser than in comparison to Blacks. In conjunction with this speech given by Older Brother, not being a part of America’s slave period, and being put on a pedestal as model minorities, we can see that Asian Americans are seen as less inferior than Blacks yet inferior nonetheless to their white
counterparts. The inclusion of the Black/White binary, then, takes away from the history of suffering Asian Americans have been through in America— from concentration camps and anti-Asian land laws to hate crimes, verbal attacks, and so on. While their history is very different from African Americans, African American discourse, as Yu argues, deserves to be separate because their inclusion within Asian American discourse further marginalizes Asian Americans.

10. Shortcomings

Although Yu has argued heavily for the advocacy for Asian rights and the straying away from Asian stereotypes, there are some shortcomings within the novel. One major drawback to Yu’s novel was Willis Wu’s ending— it was a disappointment after reading Yu’s argument throughout the novel. Willis ends up settling and states that he hopes that his white-passing daughter will have a better experience than he did since “she can move freely between worlds” (278), suggesting that one needs to be whiter to fit in or find success beyond the typical Asian roles.

White-passing is common among people of mixed race— it occurs when a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, or People of Color) is perceived as white for whatever reason, whether intentional or not. This phenomenon is initially brought up in Yu’s novel when Willis Wu meets his wife, Karen. She tells Willis that she is “able to pass in any situation as may be required. [She gets] it all. Brazilian, Filipina, Mediterranean, Eurasian. Or just a really tan white girl with exotic-looking eyes. Everywhere [she goes], people [thinks she's] one of them. They want to claim [her] for their tribe” (181). Her ability to pass is idolized by Willis as he believes it “must be amazing” and that it must be “better to be [her] than [him]” since he is just “one thing. An Asian man”
(182). His fixation on the ability to pass seems to show the desirability and acceptability of conforming to whiteness. Willis, by the end of the novel, seems to have come to the conclusion that white-passing is the only way in which Asian Americans can fit in as an “American.” He argues that his daughter’s and wife’s Eurocentric physical features will allow them to fit in and hopes that their future will be better because of it. Their racial ambiguity is what allows them to entertain the opportunities of being white and “fit in.” It is, however, what drives them away from their own Asian heritage and culture. Yu highlights this to show the injustice of marginalization and argues that there is no alternative other than white-passing in order to assimilate into American society. After creating a very thorough argument and introducing his readers to a number of the issues Asian Americans face, it was disappointing to come to this conclusion. While it would be inappropriate to romanticize the fate of Asian Americans, it seemed to be very pessimistic towards any future change.

While this novel lacks in one major aspect, it offers a great foundation for introducing the key issues Asian Americans, specifically Chinese Americans, face in the past, as well as in modern-day America. It has offered a difference in perspective— one that has considered the shifting global dynamic of the audience. This change in perspective can be accredited to the influx of advocacy for minorities and desire for equal rights/opportunities and can be seen in the shift of Hollywood’s focus.

11. Positive Film for the Asian American Community

There are still many faults with the way Asians are portrayed throughout Hollywood, however, as times are changing, it seems as though Hollywood is too. With the recent Pixar film, *Turning Red* (2022), there is a glimmer of hope for the Asian American community. Director,
Domee Shi, tells the coming-of-age story of Meilin Lee, voiced by Rosalie Chiang, who is a thirteen year old trying to find the balance between pleasing her “tiger mom” and expressing who she truly is. The creative twist is that she will magically poof into a giant (and very adorable) red panda whenever she gets overly emotional—a metaphor that marks her adolescence and step towards womanhood. This film addresses more than just the negative social stigma surrounding women’s periods and teenage lust—it addresses and discredits the powerful stereotypes associated with Asian Americans, such as tiger mom and the obedient and very studious daughter who sets out to be the absolute best in every aspect. What makes this film stand out from the others that try to stray away from Hollywood cliches is that it actually does. By the end of this film, the stereotypes that have been glued to Asian Americans have been debunked.

Aside from the group of aunties that make their way into Meilin’s life to help with her red panda crisis—as well as a beautiful temple that shows aspects of the Chinese culture—this film creatively utilizes Chinese stereotypes in order to show its audience that the Chinese culture and population are much more than they are set out to be. This can also be shown through the use of the red panda, which created “a whole legend and a mythology [that provided] a relative clean slate [so] the themes of the film can stand on their own, without other popular myths being added to or conflated with the story” (Shi in LeGardye). Because it is able to stand alone, the messages the movie sets out to show are much more impactful and significant. At the climax of the film, Melin and her mother, Ming Lee, voiced by Sandra Oh, both turn into giant red pandas to hash out their differences—they fight both verbally and physically until Melin knocks her out. Both Melin and her aunties realize that they are running out of time to allow Ming Lee to turn back into a human, so they ban together to bring her back and subdue her panda side. By the end of
the movie, her mother is able to subdue her red panda and mend her relationship with Meilin, while Meilin is able to fully accept her new-found womanhood and becomes comfortable in her “new skin.” The final scene of the movie shows Meilin and Ming triumphantly flaunting her tiger-being while showing acceptance of their differences. This scene strays away from the Asian tropes mentioned earlier because the characters have nuance and complexity. They show us that they are more than just the tiger mom and studious daughter— they are complicated and intricate, just like the rest of us. As they have conquered the hovering stereotypes and socially taboo aspects of womanhood, Meilin gives us the overall message of the film stating “We’ve all got an inner beast. We’ve all got a messy, weird part of ourselves hidden away and a lot of us never let it out. But I did” (Meilin in *Turning Red*). Other than the literal and metaphorical beast (the red panda), she parallels Asian stereotypes with “inner beasts” as they are part of the self that is inherently hidden to adhere to the image of the model minority. Meilin explains that it is a part of themselves that they choose to conceal to adhere to white standards or because of the fear that their cultural differences will not be accepted. When she concludes the film by saying “But I did” in a positive and endearing way, she implies that embracing oneself to the fullest of their cultural and gender differences is indeed the best way to go.

One critic, Sean O’Connell, argued: “Some Pixar films are made for universal audiences. ‘Turning Red’ is not. The target audience for this one feels very specific and very narrow. If you are in it, this might work very well for you. I am not in it. This was exhausting” (O’Connell in Kang). To say that the Asian Canadian experience is not “universal” is absurd and completely misses the intricacies and importance of the film. *Turning Red*, as Shirley Li states in *The Atlantic* article, “is a gift. It is a film that takes its young audience seriously” because it exposes its audience to not only the emotions of lust and the natural phases of womanhood, but also
debunks the stereotypes that have been binded to many Asians in America. The director created this movie to encourage viewers to embrace all parts of themselves including their cultural differences which carries so much weight to the countless minorities in America. This film is educational— it is not just for women and girls or just Asians, but for a much wider audience. It brings attention to and normalizes important taboo issues that have been brushed over within our society, while shattering the limitations placed on Asian Americans due to stereotypes.

This film, much like Yu’s novel, addresses the Asian tropes that have been prevalent throughout Hollywood. In Yu’s novel, however, his main character, Willis, comes to a different conclusion. He realizes that “Kung Fu guy is just another form of Generic Asian Man” (258) and that “working your way up the system doesn’t mean you beat the system— it strengthens it” (113). He understands that the roles he has been working towards all of his life have marginalized himself, as well as the rest of the Chinese American community. Sticking within the confines of the racial roles given to Willis and being afraid that “one flubbed line will [bust him and his community] back down to the background pool” (259) contrasts heavily with the recent Pixar film. Unlike Willis, Meilin in Turning Red embraces her true, “beastly” self, encouraging viewers to do the same. This film takes the generic stereotypes mentioned in Yu’s novel and creates a shift towards a more positive portrayal of Chinese Americans and their respective culture.

12. Conclusion

Charles Yu’s Interior Chinatown introduces key issues of stereotyping, why Asian Americans are never truly seen as American, and the inclusion of the Black/White binary in the
conversation about Asian American race relations. This novel speaks to society as a whole and challenges the white ideologies that have constructed the dichotomy between the races, specifically within Hollywood. Films such as *Crazy, Rich Asians* and *Turning Red* and the actresses, Constance Wu and Awkwafina, have had such a large impact on its audience and have changed— for the better or worse— the way in which we view Asian Americans. Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham’s *Asian Americans and the Media* has helped dissect these films and the works of notable actresses to understand the concerns the Asian American community continues to face. In conjunction with these significant works, Yu’s novel opens the conversation to speak out for Asian American rights, their history and unfortunate experience in America, and their desire to be heard.

Yu has addressed many of the issues within Asian American discourse and tries to break away from the scripts that have been written for them. His stance permits questions regarding Hollywood and their recent influx of Asian foreign films. The popularity and flood of these films seems to absolve Hollywood from being noninclusive. However, it instead sets apart both foreign Asians and Asian Americans, as it validates another country’s success due to its foreignness, which simultaneously separates these films as not American. The continuation of Yu’s argument can call for further analysis regarding this issue and how it augments just Asians or both Asians and Asian Americans’ assimilation into western society.
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