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Unmasking ‘Sidekick’ Masculinity: A Qualitative Investigation of How Asian-American Males View Emasculating Stereotypes in U.S. Media

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MSc in Global Media and Communications

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Dissertation submitted to the Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, August 2015, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the MSc in Media, Communication and Development. Supervised by Dr. Shakuntala Banaji.

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Published by Media@LSE, London School of Economics and Political Science ('LSE'), Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. The LSE is a School of the University of London. It is a Charity and is incorporated in England as a company limited by guarantee under the Companies Act (Reg number 70527).

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Steffi Lau

ABSTRACT

This paper sought to explore how Asian-American males perceive stereotypical media portrayals of themselves in relation to their identity and masculinity and conversely, how they construct identity and masculinity in relation to emasculating media representations. Through semi-structured interviews, this research explored the inner worlds and life narratives of 23 Asian-American men. Using thematic analysis, I found that Asian-American men by and large negatively view and reject media’s emasculating images of themselves and find resistance in choosing to assert their masculinity and identity in other ways. Nonetheless, as identity is not produced in a vacuum, but is socially recognized, Asian-American men suffer from being ascribed unwanted identities out of their control.

INTRODUCTION

I am an Oriental. And being an Oriental, I could never be completely a man. – M. Butterfly

In February 2012, after singlehandedly converting a dismal game into victory for the New York Knicks, a virtually unknown basketball player, Jeremy Lin, burst into the global spotlight, as he drove ‘near-superhuman’ point leads that led his team to victory over an unparalleled winning streak spanning seven games and toppling historical statistics (Freeman, 2012). Yet what made this underdog’s rise to stardom even more remarkable was his background: the athletic, charismatic 6’3’ Taiwanese-American was an unprecedented rarity in the league, defying stereotypes of Asian-American men as bookish, puny and physically inept.

But even in the whirlwind of popularity dubbed ‘Linsanity,’ disturbing racial undertones emerged: The *New York Post* printed a controversial headline that read ‘Chink in the Armor.’ Equally offensively, a *Fox Sports* columnist tweeted, ‘Some lucky lady in NYC is gonna feel a

couple inches of pain tonight' (Freeman, 2012).

Not only did this demeaning statement allude to an oft-repeated stereotype of Asian men having small penises, it played into a trend cemented in American media over the past century: the painting of Asian-American men as alternatively lustful outcasts with 'weak sexual abilities' (Wong *et al.* 2012: 1) or emasculated, diminutive 'men' defined by a 'striking absence down there' (Fung, 2008: 237) Altogether, these racially charged media gaffes highlighted a more unsettling problem: the naturalized acceptability of racism against Asian-American men in media and society. As one commentator pointed out, it is unthinkable that even a 'half-brained TV presenter would use racial slurs against a black player equivalent to the Asian ones that have been used against Lin' (Freeman, 2012).

These emasculating media portrayals of Asian-American men can be traced back to the mid-1800s when Chinese men arrived in the U.S. *en masse*, fulfilling a need for cheap labour (Shek, 2006). With laws limiting the immigration of Chinese women, Chinese men largely lived in bachelor societies. Fearing intermarriage, the U.S. government passed anti-miscegenation laws threatening to revoke the citizenship of white women who out-married. Reinforcing these fears was the circulation of Yellow Peril propaganda portraying Asian men as 'sexually deviant, asexual, effeminate' predators (Shek, 2006: 381). Furthermore, job opportunities were limited to traditionally female work such as laundry and cooking, further exacerbating their effeminate image (Takaki, 1993). Essentially, early conceptions of Asian-American masculinity were constructed to be disempowering in relations with employers and white society (Chua & Fujino, 1999).

As history has progressed, the racial castration of Asian-American men in the media has continued (Eng, 2001). The 20th century ushered in further pejorative images of Asian-American men in movies, including supervillain Fu Manchu (1929) who embodied a 'lack of heterosexuality'; *Sixteen Candles* (1984) which featured sex-starved exchange student Long Duk Dong accompanied by a gong chiming at his every appearance; and *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), a movie celebrated for its depiction of Chinese-American mother-daughter relationships, but with 'few, if any, redeeming' (Shek, 2006: 381) portrayals of Asian-American men, who instead were depicted as chauvinistic and miserly, ultimately driving female counterparts to white love interests (Chan, 1998).

As evidenced by the Linsanity media coverage, this humiliating narrative around Asian-American men has continued into the 21st century. Through repeated portrayals on screen of the socially awkward nerd, passive sidekicks, and the restaurant owner with an unintelligible

accent, Asian-American males have been Othered and denied their masculinity through restrictive stereotypes reducing them to comedic tropes. Rarely are Asian-American men seen as attractive leading men, or depicted as romantic options. In fact, an analysis of the 100 top-grossing films of 2013 found that Asian male characters were least likely to be in romantic relationships (28%) as compared to black men (68%), white men (58%) and Hispanic men (57%)—a dramatic gap (Smith, Choueiti, & Pieper, 2013: 7).

Thus far, academics have written about the racial castration, emasculation and ‘queering’ of the Asian-American male within the national imaginary (Eng, 2001; Parikh, 2002) from a historical and psychological lens. Yet to date, there remains insufficient literature from a media perspective on the topic. Therefore, this paper seeks to explore how Asian-American males interpret these emasculating representations and more importantly, how they construct and navigate their identities and masculinities in relation to these.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity and Representation

Media scholars have argued that representations are not only symbolic of deeper societal sentiments—they are reflective of society’s power relations. Stuart Hall writes, ‘Stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power’ (1997 a.: 258). Inextricable from ideology, representations are a form of hegemonic power. Therefore, studying stereotyping is crucial as symbolic marginalization is likely reflective of a systematic exclusion of Asian-American men from society. As Hall writes, stereotyping plays a key role in maintaining symbolic order through binding together ‘all of Us who are “normal” into one “imagined community”’ (1997 a.: 258). Through positioning Asian-American men as emasculated, American media place them in binary opposition to the accepted idea of Western masculinity, as deviants demarcating what is normal and what is not—akin to Edward Said’s (1978) theory of Orientalism detailing how the West has produced the East as Other and inferior.

Moreover, contextualizing and interrogating these portrayals is imperative, given representation’s undeniable capacity to ascribe unwanted identities. As Hall writes, identity emerges ‘in the dialogue between the meanings and definitions which are *represented to us* by the discourse of a culture, and our willingness (consciously or unconsciously) to...step into the subject positions constructed for us’ (1997 b.: 219). Similarly, Woodward asserts that although we as subjects are able to choose our identifications, this internal agency is limited

by external social constraints exerted over the subject within society. This tension renders some identities ‘inaccessible or impossible’ (2000: 18). Thus, the fact that representation is integral to identity construction—desired or not—is particularly disquieting when we consider the degrading portrayals of Asian-American men. Unable to access desired identities within society, Asian-American men may experience damaging impacts on their psyches as they negotiate their identities as men recognized as less than men.

Masculinity

The theory of hegemonic masculinity has become the backbone of masculinity research, following its proposal by R.W. Connell, who defined it as the configuration of gender practice through which patriarchy is legitimized and women are subordinated (1995: 77). Although a plurality of masculinities exists, hegemonic masculinity is considered the ‘the ideal type that is glorified and associated with white men at the highest levels of society’ (Phua, 2007: 910). The definition of hegemonic masculinity is a racialized one that automatically entails the exclusion of any man who is not white and relegates homosexuality to marginalized masculinity and racial minorities to subordinated masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Meanwhile, men of colour ‘jockey’ to ‘enter the inner circle, often as ‘honorary’ elite White men’ although their colour will never allow them full acceptance (Collins, 2004: 186).

It is worth noting the distinction that, while literature regarding black masculinities within the West has been generated, little discussion has heeded the experiences of Asian men in the West. Some point out that while Asian-Americans are ascribed docile, womanly traits, American narratives have ascribed threatening traits to other men of colour (violent black ‘studs’ with large penises, macho Latinos, and Native-American rapists) which, while still pejorative, nonetheless accentuate their masculinities as opposed to de-legitimizing them (Kim, 2005: 137).

Given this, some academics contend that Connell’s perspective is organized around a gendered lens—if the hierarchy is fundamentally structured around race, one could argue that privilege is determined by race, with gay masculinity marginalized and minority masculinity subordinated (Phua, 2007). Under this supposition, a gay man within the race of power may benefit more from existing power dynamics than a straight Asian-American man, while Asian-American gays may be doubly excluded.

Indeed, research indicates that the emasculating stereotypes can be particularly detrimental for gay Asian-American men. Phua (2007) notes that the queer community has appropriated

the Orientalism of Asian women to eroticize and fetishize Asian-American gays. Under this framework, they are simultaneously seen as hypersexual and effeminate, yet still undesirable due to the prizing of masculine traits within the queer community, which derides Asians as ‘natural-born gays’ and lesbians—a demonstration of the complex power dynamics in play within a racialized masculinity framework (Phua, 2007). Another crucial gender theory is Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity which asserts that gender is not objectively formed, but is a ‘sequence of acts,’ ‘a ‘strategy’ which has cultural survival at its end, since those who do not ‘do’ their gender correctly are punished by society’ (Salih, 2002: 58).

In a 1996 study on masculinities in college organizations, researchers found that Asian-American men are least likely to be chosen for leadership positions by classmates, with white men and white women who emulated hegemonic masculine behaviours favoured (Cheng, 1996). The students’ preference for white women exhibiting hegemonic masculine behaviours foregrounds the performative nature of gender and begs the question of whether it is more constructive to visualize U.S. power structures through a raced lens in which skin colour is more indicative of power than gender. Moreover, given the performative element of gender, it is then crucial that we ask how Asian-American men strategically ‘do’ gender in a society in which they are already symbolically dismissed and castrated.

The Current Landscape for Asian-American Men

Before diving into a qualitative discussion of the experiences of Asian-American men, it is important that we examine the research to date on the prevailing stereotypes and challenges Asian-American men face. While the image of the lecherous Chinaman has faded, Asian-Americans continue to face a host of stereotypes, including that of the model minority. Perpetuated by media in the 20th century, the model minority stereotype has led to the portrayal of Asian-Americans as ‘reserved, quiet, diligent and studious’ (Mok, 1998: 195). Though ‘deceptively positive on the surface’ (Zhang, 2010: 22), the stereotype carries negative connotations of Asian-Americans as nerdy, passive and socially inept, while also being used to de-legitimize protests of racial inequality. For men, the stereotype can be particularly acute as it fails to convey ‘the charismatic, masculine American icon’ (Mok, 1998: 195).

Yet research suggests that those who contradict the stereotype of passivity nonetheless face a backlash. A Canadian study found that participants held prescriptive stereotypes of East Asians being ‘non-dominant’, meaning that when East Asians exhibited dominant behaviour contradicting the stereotype, such as taking charge, they were more likely to be disliked by

white co-workers in comparison to dominant white co-workers who were more willingly tolerated (Berdahl and Min, 2012).

Just as pervasive is the stereotype of the perpetual foreigner which depicts Asian-Americans inassimilable, heavily-accented foreigners who can never truly be American (Suzuki, 2002). A look at Hollywood's recent portrayals indicates the extent to which this myth has continued to pervade the screen: films and shows like *The Hangover* (2009), *2 Broke Girls* and *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015) all feature heavily accented Asian foreigners—played by native-born Asian-Americans without accents.

While it is difficult to determine the extent to which media stereotypes are accepted as reality, cultivation theory proposes that prolonged exposure to media stereotypes may result in the acceptance of stereotypes as social reality (Zhang, 2010). Leveraging this theory, an empirical study found that people's perceptions about Asian-Americans are aligned with media stereotypes: amongst racial-ethnic groups in the U.S., Asian-Americans are most likely to be perceived as nerds, are most likely to be left out, and disturbingly, people are *least* likely to initiate friendship with Asian-Americans (Zhang, 2010).

Though the model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes apply to both sexes, disparities exist in media. Asian-American men are depicted as socially awkward and meek, traits that are generally unappealing in American romanticism (Sung, 1967), while women are typically depicted as servile, beautiful and delicate (Sue & Kitano, 1973). Although this exoticization isn't necessarily positive, it is notable for its alignment with traditionally desirable feminine qualities, in contrast to male stereotypes that fall short of assertive Western masculinity and attractiveness. Saliently, Hamamoto (1994) argues that minority women do not pose as much of a threat to the status quo and thus have an easier time being accepted by white society than their male counterparts. Perhaps for these reasons, it has been found that Asian-American men are significantly more aware of racism than Asian-American women (Kohatsu, 1992).

As such, huge disparities have persisted in Asian-American dating patterns, with large numbers of Asian-American women dating white men, a trend since the 1950s (Chua & Fujino, 1999). A Pew report found that 36% of Asian-American females married outside their race in 2010, compared with 17% of Asian-American males (Wang, 2012). Data from the dating site OKCupid found that Asian-American men and black women are the least desirable groups on the site (Rudder, 2014). Researchers hypothesize that stereotypical perceptions of Asian-American men as unattractive, asexual, effeminate and having small penises are to

blame (Lu & Wong, 2013). In fact, Chua and Fujino (1999) found that Asian-American men may have internalized these stereotypes, finding that out of 232 respondents, *only* white men listed themselves as sexually exciting, attractive and outgoing as compared to Asian immigrants and U.S.-born Asian-Americans.

Perhaps most salient is the stereotypes' impact on Asian-American men's self-images and identities. In a study on stressful experiences of masculinity among Asian-American men (both US men and those who immigrated as adults), Lu and Wong (2013) found that regardless of how Asian-American men see themselves, they concurrently experience appraisals of themselves as physically weak and internalise norms equating masculinity with strength, contradicting potentially positive self-concepts and prompting 'persistent fears about physical inadequacy' (Lu & Wong, 2013: 351). Their research concluded that stereotypes led participants to feel they were failing physical and emotional masculine ideals, leading them to suffer 'psychologically, socially, and physiologically' (359).

Strategies of Resistance and Distance

Given these alienating stereotypes and palpable disadvantages within social, professional and romantic spheres, it is important to understand the strategies that Asian-American men employ as they grapple to survive in a world that prizes hegemonic masculinity, yet excludes them from its definition. A study of gender strategies found that Chinese-American men engaged in 'hegemonic bargaining': subjects traded behaviours such as athleticism, assertiveness, 'frat-boy-like behaviours' (Nemeto, 2008: 83), and sentiments of 'feeling white' inside, in exchange for an 'elevation of their manhood' and less marginalized masculinities (Chen, 1999: 600). Yet these bargains are hegemonic, for in adhering to the prevailing ideals, the men reinforce a worldview by which they 'regard themselves as incomplete and inadequate' (604).

This insight exposes the paradox Asian-American men face as they negotiate their identities as men: they must either copy the white masculine norm or 'accept the fact we are not men' (Chan, 1998: 94) Accordingly, some have envisioned a 're-masculinization' agenda for Asian-American men, centred on the vision of the ideal Asian-American male as hyper-masculine, heterosexual, and U.S.-born (Hoang, 2014; Chin, 1974). Yet, the fallacy lies in the fact that emulating the ideal of white masculinity bolsters the very ideology that devalues their identities. In his book 'Racial Castration,' Eng writes that 'the untenable predicament of wanting to join a mainstream society that one knows...systematically excludes oneself and

delineates the painful problem of becoming the instrument of one's own self-exclusion' (2001: 22).

Consequently, feminist scholars have urged Asian-American men to leverage their unique position to redefine masculinity and embrace a more feminized alternative, arguing that they are at a critical juncture due to their experience with subjugation and feminism's challenge to the patriarchy (Chua & Fujino, 1999; Hoang 2014). Yet, the yearning for inclusion within the dominant masculinity structure 'overrides the politics of alliance with other oppressed groups' (Chan, 2001: 11). Moreover, academics worldwide have widely documented the institutionalized de-legitimation of alternative forms of masculinity by those within the socially dominant masculinity (Connell, 1995). Therefore, to construct an alternative model of masculinity, Asian-American men risk being further stigmatized in a power structure that already demeans them.

Conceptual Framework

This study will be framed by concepts of identity construction and hegemonic masculinity in order to explore the complex relationships between stereotypical media depictions of Asian-American men and Asian-American male identity and masculinity. As evidenced by the aforementioned work, individuals do not construct identities in a vacuum. Rather, society represents meanings to us, which we either willingly or unwillingly step into. Given media's instrumental role in cultivating these meanings, it is clear that media's restrictive portrayals of Asian-American men present a rich site for exploration of identity. Thus, this paper will examine the ways in which media create tension between human agency and cultural constraints.

Accordingly, I will use identity theory to investigate whether media render certain identities inaccessible for Asian-American men, and whether they impose other unwanted identities through its symbolic emasculation. Taking an intersectional approach, it is apparent that due to both their race and perceived lack of manhood, Asian-American men are painfully marginalized at the utmost fringes of a racialized, heteronormative power structure revering hegemonic masculinity. Juxtaposing the opposing strategies of re-masculinization and redefinition of masculinity proposed by advocates for Asian-American men, I will examine the strategies that subjects employ and view as most effective.

I will also reference prominent black feminist scholar bell hooks' theory of the oppositional gaze. Hooks asserted that 'the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of

domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency' (1992: 116). Rather than passively interpreting media as it is represented to us, she suggests that by critically looking (or choosing to stop looking) at filmic representations produced by white supremacy, our gazes become self-aware ones that resist and interrogate.

In summary, merging identity, hegemonic masculinity and gender performativity theories, I will examine how Asian-American men perceive the restrictive portrayals represented to them through media, and more importantly, how they negotiate and strategically perform the masculinities and identities available to them as they attempt to assert their manhood.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

As revealed by the wealth of aforementioned research, Asian-American men keenly feel the sting of their marginalization, whether professionally, romantically, socially or mentally. Yet, much of this research stems from a psychological approach. Furthermore, several studies have lumped together the experiences of men born and raised in the U.S. and those who have immigrated as adults—two vastly different experiences. Conspicuously little research has taken a media perspective, a dire deficiency considering the colossal influence the media has in activating and influencing stereotypes and judgments. As Morley writes, despite growing scholarship on today's mediated world, there has been a dearth of scholarship shedding light on the linkages 'between the physical and virtual forms of social and cultural exclusion' (2001: 440).

As such, this research will aim to fill a critical gap in existing research on Asian-American men by paying particular attention to the complex relationships between media, identity and perceived treatments within society. I will aim to address the following questions:

Research question:

- How do Asian-American males perceive stereotypical media representations of themselves in relation to their identity and masculinity? Conversely, how are identity and masculinity constructed in relation to media?

Sub-questions:

- To what extent do Asian-American males attribute treatment in society to restrictive stereotypes?
- Do Asian-American males have an oppositional gaze that distances them from

stereotypes in American media?

Through delving into the role of media in Asian-American males' inner worlds, I endeavour to shed light on the potentially damaging effects of stereotypical representations and pose a challenge to the naturalized acceptability of degrading Asian-American men within media.

METHODOLOGY

Given the complex nature of identity, a qualitative approach is best-suited for an exploration of the topic. Much of the research to date on the experiences of Asian-American men has taken a quantitative approach, which cannot fully capture the depth and subtleties of the Asian-American male experience. In fact, in Shek and McEwen's quantitative findings on Asian-American men's gender role conflict, they wrote that participants 'had stories to share and did not necessarily feel like their experiences' could be captured through the survey employed (2012: 706). They proposed that interviews could 'elicit a more revealing and insightful picture' of the deeper issues faced by Asian-American men (706).

Accordingly, semi-structured interviews are best-suited for an exploration of the topic, given their ability to glean intimate details on individuals' inner worlds (Silverman, 2001). A pilot study undertaken in April 2015 confirmed this as an ideal method. Given my desire to understand individual thoughts, focus groups did not seem like a fitting methodology, as the group environment does not lend itself to discussing individual identities and histories. Therefore, through the drawing out of rich personal narratives, I hoped to gain a more three-dimensional understanding of the ways in which Asian-American men interpret media and construct their identities. Indeed, feminist scholars argue that semi-structured interviewing is ideally suited for the unearthing of minority voices which 'have been ignored, misrepresented and suppressed in the past' (Byrne, 2004: 182).

I chose to employ the active interviewing approach advanced by Holstein and Gubrium who contend that the interview is a 'dynamic, meaning-making occasion' (1997: 117) and not a 'passive [filter] towards some truths about people's identities' (Silverman, 2001: 118). Indeed, identity and gender themselves are processes of representation and performativity, as is interviewing. Accordingly, in order to 'activate applicable ways of knowing,' I utilized the active interviewing approach of suggesting 'possible horizons of meaning and narrative linkages' (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997: 125). It also enabled me share my own experiences as

an Asian-American, fostering an environment of mutual disclosure that strengthened rapport.

However, as a female, I had to remain cognizant of the gender differential: as Schwalbe and Wolkomir note, men hoping to signify masculinity may resist questioning that might ‘expose the masculine self as illusory,’ and may feel ‘threat potential’ from female researchers (2002: 206). Moreover, due to the perception of Asian-American females having more enticing stereotypes, it is possible Asian-American men may feel wary of a female researcher who has not shared their experiences. Keeping this top-of-mind, I endeavoured to establish trust through a non-judgmental demeanour. Given the highly personal stories interviewees shared with me, I can report with a high degree of confidence that I did not perceive any resistance to broaching sensitive issues.

Research Design

Since I hoped to focus on identities that have been impacted by American media since an early age rather than immigrant identities, I limited recruitment to those who were either born in the U.S. or grew up in the U.S. from ages five and up. I also confined ethnicities to East and Southeast Asian ethnicities, given the drastically different set of representations of South Asians within American media. Additionally, I only interviewed Asian-Americans of full Asian descent, as I did not feel I could do the complexities of the mixed race experience justice within the scope of this paper. Lastly, I confined age demographics to ages 20-35, however participants ended up falling between 21 and 29.

Recruitment was conducted through a mixture of snowball sampling, outreach to relevant organizations and posts on online forums. Ultimately, I interviewed a total of 23 men under an agreement of confidentiality. (All names within have been changed.) The resulting data corpus yielded a rich cross-section of the Asian-American male population representing various sexualities, regions, ages, stages of life and ethnicities (see Appendix A). Of note, I paid particular attention to recruiting participants from differing communities—ones from Asian-American enclaves, ones from diverse communities, and ones who grew up in areas where they may have been a rare minority and faced more racial hostilities. This was crucial since these shape identity in distinct ways. Since the topic of media emasculation is equally as applicable to Asian-American gay men, I also recruited two gay men, hoping this would help parse out which challenges are universally related to gender and which are wholly unrelated to sexuality. Regrettably, the class and education levels were quite homogenous: except for two who came from low-income backgrounds, all the interviewees came from middle-class

families and all had attained a college education. This may be an effect of recruiting through the Internet, which may lead to a bias toward those of higher education and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Following approval of an ethics review, data collection took place through video chat. However, two interviews were conducted solely through voice chat at the request of interviewees who preferred complete anonymity. As recordings merely captured audio information, these should not impact the research. Due to the confidential nature of the interviews, I secured informed verbal consent. Verbal consent has been deemed acceptable in methodological literature, which notes that the contradiction between promising confidentiality and asking for a signed form can frustrate interviewees (Warren, 2002).

Interviews ranged from 41 to 135 minutes and averaged 90 minutes—the length of the majority of the interviews. They were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. Immersing myself in the data, I coded common emerging themes, compared them to existing theory and evaluated their relationships with my conceptual framework. Though many codes emerged, I explored how they related to each other as contexts, processes, consequences and strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), teasing out broader coherent themes. The compelling themes that emerged will be explored below.

Lastly, as a member of the Asian-American community myself, I engaged in reflexivity throughout the research, ‘a process that challenges the researcher to explicitly examine how his or her research agenda and assumptions, subject location(s), personal beliefs, and emotions enter into their research’ (Hsiung, 2008: 212). Accordingly, I challenged myself to remain reflexive throughout the analysis, endeavouring to include the range of perspectives gleaned—rather than only ones that simply support my personal assumptions.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

Triple Consciousness

At this juncture, I propose a key theory emerging from my analysis: the term ‘double consciousness’ coined by W.E.B. Du Bois to describe the split subjectivity of African-Americans, writing, ‘It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others’ (1897).

I adapt this concept to propose that rather than having a double consciousness, Asian-Americans (and other minority subjects) possess a triple consciousness, a ‘particular intuition for being watched’ (Palumbo-Liu, 1999: 301). Firstly, an *individual consciousness* representing how they see the world.

Secondly, the double consciousness: the sense of forever looking at oneself through the eyes of others. As Ty (2004) writes, Asian-Americans’ yellow skin bear indelible ‘hieroglyphics’ by which spectators decode the Asian-American body and glean a set of associated meanings. These glaring signs, much like a conspicuous birthmark, are encoded with cultural meanings rendering the individual’s more nuanced identities invisible and placing the spectators in a position of control. Thus, this second consciousness represents a hyper-awareness of what one’s hieroglyphics symbolize to others—this I will deem the *external consciousness*. For minority subjects, this entails a painful awareness of the racist judgments and media-perpetuated stereotypes attached to their bodies.

Thirdly, there is a *group consciousness* representing the capacity of minority subjects to view representations of their demographic group *as society views them*. These representations encapsulate both media representations (for example, other depictions of Asian-American men in media) and other Asian-American men in real life, who are also representatives and thus, representations of the group. As minorities develop awareness of their difference, they become irrevocably aware that society evaluates them as an inseparable whole. Subsequently, they have a third sense of viewing their peers as the dominant group does, and decoding these representations as society does.

Ultimately, this fragmented consciousness serves as the bell-weather by which Asian-American men perform their identities and gender, interact with others within society, and see themselves—with the understanding that there is always an audience. Some subjects are able to maintain the external consciousness and group consciousness as a sort of intuitive awareness of how spectators view themselves and the group—and through reflexivity—segregate these from their individual consciousness. Others may internalize these ways of viewing and decoding, swallowing them into their internal consciousness, leading to a sense of paranoia as they imagine all the ways their hieroglyphics and performativity are being decoded.

One subject who endured much overt racism came to internalize it:

Vincent: For most of my life, I was very ashamed of being Asian. It just became so innate in my head that being Asian was inferior, so I just automatically thought of myself as inferior to white and black people. I thought Asians were inherently uglier. I was insecure...you know, the Asian male stereotype of being less endowed?

Interviewer: Yes.

Vincent: I was very insecure about people wondering that about me. I felt less attractive. I looked down upon other Asians just for being Asian. And I couldn't stand anyone who was Asian with an accent.

For Vincent (see Appendix A for brief subject profiles), it is apparent that his alienating racial experiences led to a seeping of his external and group consciousness into his own—as demonstrated by him viewing both himself and other Asian-Americans as inherently inferior. This awareness of being watched can be particularly seen in his testament to his insecurity regarding people wondering about his penis size. His shame and desire to distance himself from foreign-born Asians with accents also reveals an internalization of his group consciousness. As Palumbo-Liu writes, for some Asian-Americans this ‘schizophrenic’ sense of always being watched, can lead to an internalization of ‘the dominant’s point of view’ (1999: 300).

In a more literal sense, this intuition of being watched can also exert itself as Asian-American men consume media portrayals of themselves. Upon asking one subject how he felt when viewing negative portrayals of Asian-American men, he responded:

Robert: For the longest time, there would be a sense of, “Everyone's looking at me.” As a kid, watching that in a classroom of people, I would actually feel terrible, especially in middle school, as social standing began becoming more apparent to me. [sighs] Now, depending on who I'm around, I will clue into my own feeling of projection of how other people are seeing the person on screen. That could be me feeling defensive for my own race, feeling like a second-class citizen, feeling like “Well, this is the way it is, and we just gotta do better kind of thing,” it could be care-taking for others, meaning wanting to help others not feel bad about watching this.

Robert’s experience illustrates the theory of triple consciousness—and the ability for all three to intertwine and converge. As a child he was unable to separate his personal perception of the characters (individual consciousness) from how surrounding classmates were viewing it (group consciousness) from how the portrayals reflected on him (external consciousness), leading to shame. As an adult, his emotional experiences indicate a universal sense of unshakeable group identity. Robert’s experience is emblematic of the fragile split consciousness Asian-American males possess and the emotional toll this can take.

Thus, using this theoretical tool of the triple consciousness, I will delve into how Asian-American men navigate media, masculinity and identity.

Always the Sidekick

Subjects were profoundly aware of the stereotypes embedded in mainstream media's depictions of them. None of the 23 saw media favourably in terms of Asian-American male depictions. Upon asking each subject how they would describe Asian-American men on-screen, the most common traits that surfaced were: meek, short, smart yet socially awkward, nerdy, insane, strong accents, effeminate, out-of-shape, unsexy, and never paired with women—all qualities failing the Western conception of ideal masculinity.

Furthermore, despite explicitly asking subjects to describe 'Asian-American' characters, several volunteered Asian actors such as Jackie Chan and Jet Li—perhaps an internalization of the conflation of 'Asian-American' with 'Asian' and 'foreign' on screen and within society. Saliiently, when discussing racial taunts, 12 subjects later reported being asked if they knew kung fu and being called 'Jackie Chan' or 'Jet Li' while growing up, an indication of how the dearth of Asian-American media portrayals can translate to widespread racial ignorance from peers and a resulting feeling of not being seen as American.

Some compelling descriptions of Asian-American male characters included:

David: The setup for the punchline. Not to be taken seriously as three-dimensional human beings.

Robert: Plagued with anxiety. Emotionally insecure. Physically diminutive. Inconsiderate. Not socially or verbally competent. Challenged. Unfairly treated. Dismissed.

Vincent: They're like *the side*...you have to pay attention to them to find them, you know? Basically they're not important, they're just secondary persons.

Ben: In one word, a joke.

Walter: Book-smart, but not socially savvy and...not very empathetic. And so they're perceived as not quite relatable characters...they don't have that human aspect.

We can see a strong interpretation of the characters as marginalized within the film—not seen as equal humans, but rather thinly veiled 'punchlines' or caricatures on 'the side,' to be laughed *at* and then dismissed. Just as Mulvey (1975) contends that women are coded with to-be-looked-at-ness in film, it can be argued that Asian-American men are coded with to-be-laughed-at-ness, which subjects were cognizant of. Subjects often perceived Asian-American

male characters as being defined by their 'Asianness' rather than more three-dimensional and humanizing traits, ultimately rendering their 'Asianness' itself the joke.

Disconnect

For many, the lack of humanizing portrayals led to a feeling of disconnect from American media, with several reporting they felt a lack of strong Asian-American role models available to them on screen. As a result, they were unable to relate and empathize:

Victor: In middle school, I was watching TV and it struck me that *none of them look like me*...you know, it always felt very difficult for me to empathize with the characters...I just felt like: that has nothing to do with me...So when I joined [Asian-American organization] in college, they watched a lot of Taiwanese dramas, Korean dramas...and I'm watching it and for the first time, I'm beginning to notice: 'Oh my God, that's *me*. In some sense, I *get* that'...So that's when I unplugged myself from Western media...it just felt like it's not meant for me.

For some, this disconnect has continued even with current portrayals. Upon discussing *Fresh off the Boat*, a sitcom launched in 2014 and widely hyped for its pioneering focus on a Taiwan-American family, Walter revealed a nagging sense that the show didn't reflect reality:

Walter: I think about the dad in the show and he is a feminized character...you know, doesn't seem like a very assertive fellow, he's just very positive, but there's no edge...That's not what my dad is like, that's not what any Asian-American dad I know is like.

Here, Walter's comments reflect an oppositional gaze as he recognizes the jarring gap between portrayals of Asian-American male characters on screen and real life. In keeping his individual consciousness and group consciousness distinct, he resists the Asian-American male representation as it is offered to him. However, some subjects exercised an oppositional gaze in other ways, choosing to identify with characters in a colour-blind manner:

Lang: My dad performs super duper masculine, like his whole deal is he's super strong, works out 3-4 hours a day, he's really into Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Interviewer: So growing up, when you saw effeminate Asian-American characters, did you ever feel that didn't match your knowledge of your father?

Lang: I thought he *was* represented when I saw Arnold Schwarzenegger or action stars. So long as they were hyper-masculine; that was my dad. I knew my dad was masculine no matter what the media portrayals were, so I trusted that. This is what dudes were to me and it didn't matter if they were different races.

Lang's ability to cut across race in order to identify strong, hegemonic male characters as emblematic of his closest role model, his father, indicates how vastly media perceptions can vary from person-to-person. He also demonstrates the agency Asian-American men can exert against marginalizing media portrayals by choosing to gaze in resistant ways.

'I'm Just Bracing Myself'

When discussing emotions felt upon viewing portrayals of Asian-American men, the most common feelings were: anger, shame and disappointment. Seemingly across the board, many expressed feelings of bracing themselves to find out whether media would play into their expectations of stereotypical depictions.

Matt: As an Asian dude, you're always just watching and bracing yourself, like: 'Are they going to crap on Asian dudes again? Is it going to be what I think it is?'

This sense of dread translated to subjects' treatments within real life, with a few participants remarking that growing up they had been mocked with the names of embarrassing Asian-American characters in media. As a result, quite a few responded that they had resented Asian-American male portrayals and wished there were less. Rather than viewing media figures as inspirational as so many adolescents do, they viewed them as entry points for peers to make fun of them. Lang remarked, 'If there was an Asian character anywhere and it was slightly ridiculous, I *knew* it was going to get quoted at me no matter what.'

Here, we can see a direct correlation between subjects' perceptions of media and treatments within society. Perhaps because representations are so few and far between, Asian-Americans are lumped in with stereotypical depictions on screen—with several reporting that this led to resentment for their Asian-American identities. This trend is so pervasive that often reactions to negative media portrayals are amplified—several subjects described reacting with anticipations of backlash upon learning of news involving Asian-Americans in a negative light.

One particular incident was proactively mentioned by seven subjects: the 2007 Virginia Tech massacre in which a Korean-American college student killed 32 of his classmates and himself. Conspicuously, many media outlets emphasized his immigrant status in headlines and dubbed him a 'South Korean shooter' despite him immigrating to the U.S. at age eight. Subsequently, Asian-American media watchdog associations denounced the overemphasis on his race, arguing this implied a correlation of foreignness with his crime (Chuang, 2012). The seven subjects reported feeling foreboding and a sense of dread upon hearing the news:

Vincent: When it happened, I thought: 'Aw *shit*, the next day I go to school, I'm definitely going to hear someone make a comment like, 'Did you bring a gun to school?'" And so I went to school and it was *there*. I could *feel* it.

Ben: I remember as the media was covering that, I was a little concerned and probably had the same emotions that my black or Middle Eastern friends might feel...a little bit of: 'Will people be afraid of me?' To think that I'm mentally unstable or that I'll go off the deep end?

The anxiety that the subjects express regarding sharing the shooter's race can be seen as an extension of the group consciousness—and rightly so, as evidenced by the subsequent backlash that some subjects recalled: one subject remembered his teacher remarking in front of the entire class that he resembled the shooter. It is worth noting that none of the seven subjects who brought up the shooting were Korean-American, yet still expressed concern, indicating an awareness of the tendency of American media and society to lump together and conflate different ethnicities. Moreover, this suggests a silent understanding that white Americans do not carry the same burden of group representation that minorities do. In turn, Asian-American men implicitly understand that, as rarities, they are inextricably chained to the portrayals media present to society, regardless of how tenuous or undesired the connection is.

The Responsibility of Representation

Film-wise, perhaps more than any other recent movie, one was overwhelmingly loathed. When asked to name specific characters on screen, 12 subjects mentioned the film *The Hangover* (2009), in which Korean-American actor Ken Jeong portrays Leslie Chow, a flamboyant, psychotic gangster with a comical Chinese accent and effeminate mannerisms, with his puny body often seen naked along with his small penis (a running gag throughout the film). Jeong's character serves as a foil to his white co-stars and seemingly embodies every Asian male stereotype. Many expressed extreme contempt for the character:

Ben: I can still find it funny...but it doesn't paint a great picture for people who don't understand Asian-American men. It worries me that he's such a prominent character and they're so few and far between.

Matt: I watched it with white people, so you can't just be so open with saying 'That movie is super racist' because you know, amongst your white friends, no one wants to talk about race...So I was just like 'The jokes aren't funny...' [hesitant] But amongst your Asian friends, you can be like, [angry] 'Yo, that movie *fucking sucked*, Ken Jeong is a fucking traitor, selling out our race for some cheap jokes. Why is he doing this to us? Fuck him, man.'

Peter: Ken Jeong comes to mind. Just a bunch of guys who coon it up for white people, they kind of shuck and jive for an audience. And what a white audience wants to see from Asian men is *still* this effeminate Long Duk Dong goofy guy. I just feel extreme embarrassment ... There's *nobody* else that it's acceptable to do that kind of demeaning of, but it's acceptable to do that to Asian dudes.

Here a number of insights surface: although subjects seemed to universally find the portrayal disgraceful and exercise an oppositional gaze, some were able to separate this from their opinion of the movie itself, remarking that they still were able to find humour in it. We can

interpret this as a detachment of the subjects' individual consciousness (through which they are able to still find the movie likeable) from their group consciousness (through which they imagine Jeong's portrayal through the eyes of other spectators). This separation can be seen as a manifestation of a quote from hook's work on the oppositional gaze in which one black woman states that in order to obtain pleasure from screen images of black womanhood, she 'must not look too deep' (1992: 121).

On the other end of the spectrum, for some, this led to a repudiation of both the movie and the actor and intense disgust. Compellingly, we can also perceive a demonstration of group consciousness across the board, as all indicate an awareness of the portrayal's detrimental impact on society's perception of Asian-American men as a whole—on 'us.' It is interesting to note Peter's comparison of Mr. Chow to the aforementioned Long Duk Dong (see p. 4), from more than 30 years ago—an illustration of how little depictions of Asian-American males have evolved.

However, participants were split on their feelings regarding Jeong's decision to take up that role. Some acknowledged that as an actor in a film industry with limited positive Asian-American roles, they understood his need to further his career and instead blamed the media industry. Others had strong feelings that he had a responsibility to more judiciously select roles:

Ben: I do think he has a responsibility...we all have responsibilities. For any minority group, your actions affect people's perceptions. You know, growing up, I was a rowdy kid, but around certain audiences, I would be on my best behaviour. I felt I had a responsibility to not affect someone's prejudgment of the next Asian-American they encounter or the next generation. So there's that weight that Asian-American men have, and that answer also applies to [Jeong].

For many Asian-American men, portrayals are not simply portrayals. Like Ben, many exhibited a hyper-awareness that disgraceful portrayals reflect on societal perceptions of them. Accordingly, many articulated an awareness that they themselves are representations of the group—a *responsibility of representation*. They felt an obligation to carry themselves in ways that would reflect Asian-American men positively, even if only creating change on a miniscule level. We can see the performativity concept is represented in Ben's usage of the term 'audiences.'

Conversely, despite perceiving American media as bleak for Asian-American males, subjects were able to find pride in the few positive portrayals. Overwhelmingly, many subjects spoke of Jeremy Lin with a strong sense of admiration, remarking that he resonated with them due to his breaking of stereotypes. Notably, several subjects who had recalled being

underestimated within sports while younger due to stereotypes of Asian-American men lacking athleticism, empathized with his struggle to be taken seriously in sports:

Allen: Growing up...things like playing basketball...you're always seen differently based on race. Because people are making quick judgments like how well people play based on race. *[hesitant]* At times, probably I was judged more harshly than others, based on assumptions based on race. I would use the example of a try-out where maybe I'd be judged more harshly and have to perform better than someone else of another race...in order to be regarded in the same way...

Gaoxue: I went to a white school and I would always get laughed at or taken as a joke when I tried out for sports. They would say 'Are you serious?' because they never saw an Asian boy play sports because that's not what they're exposed to in the media. I would get ridiculed just because that's not what their standard view of an Asian male is...and so, I really gravitated towards Jeremy Lin's rise in the media. I feel it was a definite changing point in how Americans view Asian-American males.

Even subjects who were not sports fans saw Lin as a strong source of pride and reported closely following his winning streak. It seems that the inescapable ties to being judged as a group have an amplifying effect on subjects' receptions of Asian-American media figures: resulting in either heightened likes or dislikes for group representations. However, due to group consciousness (awareness of being judged as a group), even positive representations can be a source of apprehension:

Walter: When Jeremy Lin had his big explosion, I was *very* nervous. Every time I would watch a news highlight of something amazing he did again, I was like *[mimics wiping forehead]*: 'Phew. Phew. Phew.' *[relieved]* And essentially I felt that as an Asian-American, his confidence was going to be tested a lot, and how he handled that was going to be a huge statement for Asian-Americans in sports. Had it been any player who just exploded, I would've just been cheering them on, but because I was just thinking about what the backlash on *me* would be if he begins to mentally break down, that part made me very nervous.

Keenly aware of their unshakeable links to other members of the group, Asian-American men are aware that each new representation has the power to transform society's perceptions of Asian-American males for better or worse.

Romantic Desirability

Throughout their interviews, the majority of subjects agreed on a recurring theme: the fact that Asian-American males are disadvantaged within the dating realm, particularly when it comes to pursuing white women. However, a significant number also mentioned hearing Asian-American females express disdain for Asian-American men 'all the time.' Many attributed this to unflattering Asian-American male depictions as unattractive within media, expressing sentiments of being at the bottom of the 'totem pole' under white, black and Hispanic males in terms of desirability.

Allen: There is almost no representation, and when we are represented, it's in a way that doesn't suggest...sexiness? And pretty much across the board, there's never an Asian male playing a romantic lead in any TV show. *Never*. So it almost certainly plays a pretty big role in people's preferences...your experiences shape what you find unattractive...and I'm sure media is a big part of that.

Others drew comparisons with depictions of Asian-American women within media, although all seemed cognizant of their harmful sexualization. Still, many asserted that as a result, Asian-American females are seen as more attractive and viable romantic options.

Ben: Asian-American women are portrayed to be very desirable...and this is just my judgment, but I think that the men who are cast tend to be unattractive. And I think there are very attractive Asian-American men *out there*. But if you were to judge purely based off of mainstream movies, you wouldn't think that.

Gaoxue: You never even see Asian guys depicted in a desirable way. I see how it affects my Asian-American peers. It just saddens me...it really hurts their self-confidence when they see the prevalence of Asian-American women dating white guys. They start to blame themselves...it affects how they look at themselves, and that transpires into them shaming Asian-American women in those relationships. I think that shaming is an effect of the media portrayals of themselves because they start to hate themselves so much that they want to put that negative energy into blaming someone else.

We are already at the bottom of the attraction pool in regards to race so if they see that their own counterparts, Asian-American women, don't find them attractive, then what shot do they have of gaining a partner?

Like many subjects, Gaoxue and Ben share a belief that the 'unattractive' images of Asian-American men can distort both society's perception of Asian-American male desirability and how Asian-American men see their own desirability. Along these lines, quite a few subjects linked the stereotype of being less endowed to the lack of romantic success. This stereotype arguably produced the most deep-rooted sense of shame and exasperation: ten men—unprompted—recounted being mocked with small penis jokes since childhood and even well into adult life. Although many attempted to laugh off these stereotypes, there were several admissions of the traumatizing impact of these taunts and resulting insecurity.

Matt: It made me feel really shitty. I don't really think too much about that to be honest because it's kind of traumatic. Hearing something like that when you grow up...it made me feel pretty insecure and powerless...

Some took particular issue with the pervasiveness of the small penis jokes on screen:

Gary: That's a very common stereotype to hear and see and that can be very emasculating to the Asian-American male psyche. Before the Asian-American male can get started running a race, it's like he is already handicapped. If someone already has preconceived notions about who you are and your body, that sets up a self-fulfilling prophecy for the Asian-American male, leading him into eventually believing those things about himself and handicapping himself. So he would have less of a chance at being successful in the dating world than his white

counterpart. And so, those stereotypes can be damaging and definitely should not be on mainstream TV where millions of people are watching and feeding into.

Here Gary seems to allude to a phenomenon that several subjects expressed: the possibility of emasculating stereotypes of Asian-American men creating a self-perpetuating cycle, with these media stereotypes being regurgitated by those within society, in turn detrimentally impacting Asian-American male self-confidence, in turn actually harming Asian-American masculinity. Indeed, this layman theory seems to align with the looping effect proposed by Hacking (1999) which details the power and agency that both external social forces and group members have in respectively propagating and internalizing essentialized group characteristics. Moreover, these testimonies from Asian-American men attest to the immense role (and harm) stereotypical media portrayals exert in debilitating potentially positive self-concepts:

Walter: There's not a whole lot of confidence-building out there. No media portrayals make you feel like 'Oh, that's me,' nothing out there that makes you feel that there are role models or examples of the type of person that you are. So in society, Asian-American men aren't given a lot of confidence naturally. We don't derive confidence from what we see and we don't derive confidence just from how other people perceive us. So you have to *fight very, very* deliberately to develop your own confidence...I don't know if that's something that white men or men of other races have to put as much thought into.

Identity and Masculinity Strategies

Having shed light on the ways in which subjects interpret media and its perceived impact within their worlds, it is clear that Asian-American men by and large exert a strong oppositional gaze against emasculating images offered to them. Moreover, they conceptualize media as having strong ramifications on their self-confidence, identity, and perceived treatments within society. Given that, we must ask: how do Asian-American men strategically construct and perform their identities and masculinities?

Identity-wise, subjects were aware to varying degrees that their Asian exteriors take the forefront in shaping people's perceptions of them, regardless of how nuanced and non-stereotypical their identities might be. Some saw stereotypes as 'baggage' preventing people from looking beyond their race.

Walter: It's almost like you're not being treated as a human being, you're being treated as an idea. That's the worst kind of racism.

Interviewer: What do you mean by being treated as an idea?

Walter: Um, some of my friends in college...I didn't view myself as Asian-American when I was hanging out with them, but I realized they definitely viewed me as Asian-American. People aren't thinking of you as another person, they're thinking of you as all those things that

they have in their head that come along with being Asian. There's just this baggage that you have, that is really heavy, and when you're hanging out, you can *feel* that—it's in the air.

Much like having a 'birthmark' (Ty, 2004) on one's face that one can sense being stared at, Asian-American men are unable to wipe off the cultural meanings their bodies are encoded with. Consequently, many stressed needing to develop non-stereotypical traits in order to overpower the one-dimensional meanings their 'Asianness' connoted.

Accordingly, to strategically position themselves as varied individuals, many widely employed the strategy of *emphasizing the opposite of* stereotypes: many shared that while younger, they had felt compelled to take up more unexpected hobbies such as basketball and skateboarding to rebel against stereotypes and represent themselves as 'cool Asians.' Some reported adopting more aggressive and outspoken behaviour in the workplace and classroom to contest model minority stereotypes. Another discussed being a 'little girl-crazy,' commenting, 'I think sometimes I need to show I'm interested to prove that I'm a man.' On a more verbally performative level, the majority of subjects admitted to emphasizing certain non-stereotypical facts about themselves within conversations as a 'buffer' to flag to people: 'Look, I'm not all of what you think I am.'

Subjects generally felt that in order to avoid being seen as one-dimensional 'ideas' (not unlike how they described their on-screen counterparts) they needed to perform and represent themselves in unexpected ways to assert themselves as full human beings:

Peng: I have to make an extra effort in order to push something other than my Asian identity to the front...so if I'm at a gym, I can't just be 'that Asian guy,' I have to be 'that guy who does ten miles a day.' Or if I'm at a dance class, I have to specifically be very good or have some outlandish personality that will separate me from just being generic. If I am generic, then I will be known as 'the Asian guy' and that's where the social and romantic disadvantage comes from. If you don't fill someone's mind about who you are, they'll just fill their brains about what you are stereotypically...and stereotypically, Asian males aren't seen well.

Yet, despite the desire to carve out nuanced identities and distance themselves from emasculating stereotypes, it was abundantly clear that Asian-American men felt certain identities were off-limits to them due to societal constraints and reduced social capital. Three compelling themes played a chief role in rendering certain identities inaccessible and impossible for Asian-American men: safety, authenticity and legitimacy.

Safety

A quite harrowing theme that emerged was the theme of emotional safety. Although the vast majority of subjects I spoke with had developed healthy self-concepts as adults, several reported internalized racism while younger. Upon digging deeper into some subjects' narratives, it seemed that for some, this was intertwined with alienating taunts of being

foreign, combined with societal and media degradation of Asian-Americans, particularly against immigrant Asians.

For one particular subject, Robert, this shame manifested itself especially deeply, as it became clear to him as an adult how race influences romantic, professional and social success. Robert reported feeling ‘broken and less than’ during college as he became painfully aware of how his status as an Asian-American male entailed automatic disadvantage within a racialized world. In his pursuit of ‘social proof,’ he engaged in obsessive weight loss tracks, having noticed that lower fat distribution in his face made him look less Asian. Even still, he was tormented with identity crises and trouble relating to men in the workplace. As an adult, he had a striking epiphany:

Robert: It tore upon a deep emotional wound which is...I have deep shame around the fact that my father is an Asian man. It makes me fearful...I don't feel safe living in America with an Asian father. I couldn't look to the man closest to me for a role model. [emotional, frustrated] *It's not safe to be him* so I didn't want to become him. I didn't trust my father enough to acknowledge the fact that this was a man who had wounded me through childhood, simply by being an immigrant. I didn't want to admit that my childhood was imperfect because of his racial experience. I didn't want to acknowledge his experiences, his pain.

Evidently, marginalization extends far deeper than Asian-American men's nuclear identities—it shapes how some relate to and view their closest role models: their fathers. From conversations with subjects, I postulate that internalized racial shame combined with an awareness of how Asian-American men are treated and seen within white society can lead to a sense of vulnerability, particularly as children seeking protection. Subjects realized their supposed protectors are no less immune to the same emasculating external forces they endure. Unable to glean symbolic safety from their closest male figures, others like Robert yearned to distance themselves from Asian-American identity to seek security.

Although most had come to embrace their Asian-American identities as adults, many disclosed grappling with vestigial senses of shame when encountering recent Asian immigrants and tourists, dubbed ‘fresh off the boat’ (‘FOBs’)—a term that is often used derisively even within the Asian-American community.

David: I interact with a lot of Asian tourists and they are always hyper-visible as tourists who are not from there. So a lot of times, classmates complain about Asian tourists and I have this issue I've been wrestling with in my head...I definitely have felt shame when people who are FOBs or first-generation do things that, for example, my father would do...and I'm attempting to work through that internalized shame about those stereotypes...it feels like I'm being lumped in with them and I shouldn't be.

As David conveys, sentiments of undesired group identity can morph into internalized group consciousness as Asian-American men become aware of the racialized power structures they

inhabit, ultimately leading to a desire to detach themselves from the most stereotypical and ridiculed representatives of the group: accented and less culturally assimilated Asians (including their fathers)—in a bid for safer identities. It is productive to ask how much this is due to caricaturing Asian characters with comical foreign accents on-screen.

Authenticity

In addition to legitimacy and safety, authenticity is a key measure by which subjects judged which identities are feasible for them. A few subjects mentioned a nagging irritation with certain Asian-American media figures who emulated hip-hop culture. Although initially they weren't able to articulate the root cause of this frustration, some probing revealed sentiments that Asian-Americans had falsely co-opted black hip-hop culture, remarking that it didn't seem authentic. In another example, one subject who had grown up in rural Oregon remarked that he and his father had completely integrated into the 'redneck' community, taking on local hobbies such as hunting and fishing which he shared with his white friends.

Will: The only difference between myself and them was the way that they dressed. They wore cowboy boots and stuff like that, very typical wranglers. And if I were to do that, I would just feel kind of fake, like a Halloween costume or something, because you know... [trails off] My dad wore that stuff which was weird...

This theme of authenticity is also compellingly illustrated in another quote:

Peng: In middle school, because there was a lack of Asian roles in American media, I almost looked to Asian media for what a positive role model should be in terms of how to get girls or how to keep cool. I would see white media and I just remember seeing lumberjack-esque guys, lots of body hair...and I remember thinking: I probably can't do that, so how do I be cool? I guess act like this K-pop star, I guess that's what cool looks like for an Asian guy.

Interviewer: So you felt like you couldn't pull off the kind of coolness that white or American media portrayed?

Peng: Yeah. Um...there's this one scene in one of the *American Pie* movies with this Asian guy who talked really 'black' and you know, a lot of people say Asians escaped into black culture to be seen as cool and to have a refuge. At the end of the scene, they all make fun of the kid and say, 'Stop talking like that, you're Asian, your dad runs a restaurant, you're not from the ghetto.'

And um, that's just one example, but I feel like the reason I couldn't fit the white guy coolness was because [*hesitant*]...an Asian guy trying to emulate white cool was ridiculed as being a poser or faking it or not actually cool. Imagine a white guy in a Ferrari wearing a polo...an Asian guy trying to do that would come off as...just like comedic relief because he's out of place.

I contend that Asian-American men (particularly those going through adolescence and navigating what it means to be men) are caught in a precarious predicament when it comes to finding role models: unable to look to their marginalized father figures; unable to find inspiration within the emasculated Asian-American images available to them; and unable to feel they can rightfully inhabit 'white cool' and white masculinity without facing ridicule for

being out-of-place. Seeking role models they can identify with, several subjects consequently looked to alternative sources such as YouTube or Asian media in search of authentic avenues toward manhood. Peng's example of an Asian-American character who provides comedic relief to make his point illustrates how deeply the caricaturing of Asian-American male characters can mark the psyches of Asian-American men long after fading from the hegemonic audiences' imagination.

Legitimacy

The data reveals that Asian-American men have felt the impact of emasculating media stereotypes seep into all aspects of their lives from self-confidence to romantic success to body image to how they seek certain identities. Given this, I would like to return to the question of how Asian-American men then approach gender performativity as they attempt to negotiate a rigid hegemonic, heteronormative power structure in which their masculinities are devalued: Do they prefer a re-masculinization approach in which they can claim their rightful manhood through adhering to hegemonic masculine ideals? Or do they prefer to leverage their marginalized positions to redefine masculinity in less heteronormative ways?

The answer lies in the theme of legitimacy. Bombarded with media and societal emasculation, Asian-American men wish to be taken seriously as men. This desire for acceptance manifests itself as a hyper-awareness of how they perform masculinity. One subject confessed that having grown up as a rare minority in Indiana, for him, performing masculinity is a key to acceptance:

Lang: I always knew that I stood out in a sea of white people, so I would always feel like people's eyes were on me, that I was being observed. And I had to find a way...I knew I was different, but I had to find a way that I was comfortable with myself to be different, you know? So for me, masculinity was it. I used to excessively read self-help books about body language and masculinity. And in social situations, I would check myself like 'Am I standing right? Am I sitting with my legs crossed in way that's masculine or not? Is anyone looking at me when I do this?' And I think because of the way our society is, a lot of dudes no matter what race you are, do it, but I also want to say that for me, it was maybe more intense. For me, it's like I have to steel myself in order to perform masculinity.

Although Lang acknowledges that all men to some extent 'perform' masculinity (a phrasing he volunteered), his external consciousness of 'being observed' causes him to have a heightened awareness of the performative nature of gender as he attempts to navigate his difference. He also alludes to an observation that perhaps for white men who don't have to confront pressures of being watched, their gender performativity is not conducted as deliberately. This highlights a compelling point: painfully aware of being watched and judged, and of the emasculating stereotypes attached to their bodies, Asian-American men are arguably much more aware than other males within society that their every movement

will be assessed as a statement of their masculinity, allowing them to either earn or lose legitimacy. Given this, they tend to approach the ways in which they perform masculinity deliberately, intentionally and strategically.

However in their performativity choices, many are aware that they don't possess the legitimacy necessary to safely bend the rules of game.

Victor: In a sense, it's not that we have less room to perform gender, it's that we have zero room... emasculation is something that is both physical and societal, because it's something that is reinforced by social norms and we don't have any performative roles that entail us having any balls.

Fred: I actually feel like there's a lot of latitude with masculinity. You can be masculine in a lot of ways. But on the other hand, it's easier for white men to be very fluid in their masculine identity. There can be a variety of roles and it doesn't affect them negatively, whereas Asian-American men are struggling against effeminate stereotypes and so it's often like they're pigeonholed into a certain kind of masculinity. A lot of Asian-American guys feel like they have to be the athletic muscular type to combat it, whereas I could just as easily say they could be a masculine hipster, but they don't consider that a possibility.

Timothy: Sometimes I had the feeling that I have to demonstrate that I am somehow a man...it seemed like it wasn't as safe for me to adopt more gender-ambiguous stances. I remember at a certain point, pink polo shirts became trendy for men, but in my head, I was like: 'I don't know if I can pull that off'. Because, as opposed to the weird juxtaposition of a black dude in a dress... it actually reinforces his masculinity, because it's so out-of-place. But if it was an Asian guy in a pink shirt, then it might actually be like: 'Well, this is what we expected from the stereotypes'.

Yearning to be taken seriously as men, Asian-American men are aware that to engage with more alternative forms of their masculinity entails a certain risk of further de-legitimation of their masculinity. Like Fred, quite a few voiced that they felt white and black men had more latitude to deviate from hegemonic masculine norms without risking backlash. With the knowledge that masculinity is inextricably linked to status within society, Asian-American men must exert a concerted effort to counter stereotypes and assert their legitimacy as men. However, this struggle to claim legitimacy within hegemonic power structures can lead to a sense of more unorthodox identities being risky or even impossible.

Consequently, several shared desires to achieve normalized masculine ideals such as being assertive and building muscles. A recurrent sentiment seemed to be that since society has been socialized to respect masculinity, straying further from masculine norms would disempower Asian-American men even further. Accordingly, some desired to not just meet the masculine ideal, but to be perceived as hyper-masculine to overcorrect for their feminization. One subject shared his commitment to working out in order to look like a 'Greek god' and expressed the need to 'shock' people into believing Asian-American men are masculine:

Matt: The more swaggery Asians we have just pushes that [emasculatation] away. If it goes so far and so bombastic that people are like 'Yo, all these Asians are so cool, I want to be like them' it creates a safer space for the nerdy Asian...Let's push it to bombastic levels...If you don't want to be it, don't. But I think it would be more effective if every Asian dude looked like Thor and were sexual monsters and was awesome at everything. That would be *SO* much more effective in terms of removing the emasculatation...And *then* you can have your nerdy Asian, your artsy Asian.

It is interesting to note Matt's desire to foster a 'safer space of the nerdy Asian,' which draws on the aforementioned themes of both safety and group consciousness and alludes to an awareness of the risk and ridicule stereotypical Asian-American men face. Matt embodies the responsibility of representation that so many other Asian-American men carry on their shoulders as they become racially conscious—much like ambassadors, they are imbued with a hyper-awareness that each act is a performance and each Asian-American body is a representation of the group. While arguably controversial, his thoughts convey a transcendence beyond individual performativity to group solidarity—a desire to advance the position of Asian-American men *as a whole* to the point where it is safe for Asian-American men to be fluid in masculinity without losing legitimacy.

On the other end of the spectrum, some argued that having already been disempowered and locked out from the definition of masculinity, there was no further risk to them. They felt their location outside of mainstream masculinity could serve as a space empowering them to be themselves and carve out their own versions of masculinity.

Peter: People like to put men in a masculine box, like 'this is what being a man entails, this is what a man's privilege is'. I think it's interesting that a lot of those things...don't really apply to Asian-American men...Nobody is afraid of me, nobody feels threatened by me, so the way I look at it...Dude, I'm my own man. Because we're already not seen as men...I just do a bunch of shit that most men wouldn't do because they're afraid they'll look like a sissy. But they already put me in a sissy box anyway...it's not like I have any further to plunge.

Timothy: One of the things about the idea that we're perpetual foreigners is that it actually helps us create our own identity when you can exclude us from your community, you know? If you don't see us as full Americans in the first place, then why would we want to embody the American masculinity? So that can be kind of empowering because then you don't have to fit in because they wouldn't let you in anyways.

While those like Peter and Timothy view their alternative positions as liberating, their statements also carry a sentiment of futility as they note the fruitlessness of striving for acceptance into hegemonic masculinity—an echelon they are locked out of, and for which only white men hold the keys. Arguably, the stance of redefining masculinity also demands a thick skin, a need to *not care or want* legitimacy from the mainstream power structure.

Even so, the binary nature of these opposing poles may leave gay Asian-American men out of the picture. One gay subject discussed how, as he has entered adulthood, he's begun to question which behaviours and mannerisms are true to him and which have been instilled due to a desire to 'pass' in a heteronormative society. He's begun to experiment with contextual deviations in his mannerisms toward both masculine and more feminine poles:

David: Identifying as gay gives me more freedom to explore these things and not be viewed as totally illegitimate. I feel like I identify with some of those traits associated with Asian-American men in the media that other Asian-American guys hate...so it's really weird because sometimes I feel like I'm *betraying the cause*. Like failing at that ideal of a masculine, anti-stereotypical Asian-American man and also confirming stereotypes about Asian guys, even though I know both those things are BS.

Here it becomes apparent that despite an awareness of the socially constructed nature of masculinity, David cannot help but feel guilty for 'confirming' stereotypes. This can again be attributed to the idea of group consciousness—cognizant of the re-masculinization agenda that those like Matt advocate, David is unable to shake off a lingering sense of obligation to 'the cause' of reclaiming masculinity. His thoughts foreground the flawed nature of a heteronormative lens—perhaps it is not men possessing traditionally 'feminine' qualities themselves that should be condemned, rather, the social constructs that authorize some to possess these and others to not.

While David, Peter and Matt each encapsulate disparate positions in the re-masculinization vs. redefinition debate, they ubiquitously demonstrate the forceful ways in which symbolic emasculation and exclusion shape the subjectivities of the Asian-American male—as they navigate the gendered power structure, they must either strive for legitimacy, accept the futility of acceptance or straddle these fragile social constructs.

CONCLUSION

Analyzing 23 semi-structured interviews, it is evident that Asian-American males adversely view and interpret stereotypical media portrayals of themselves, viewing their media counterparts as marginalized, emasculated and ridiculed. From the data elicited in this research, I contend that many Asian-American males find agency in resisting these representations, understanding that these are not desirable identities, nor ones they are content to settle for. Through exerting an oppositional gaze, they critique and interrogate the deceptively comical portrayals of themselves.

Yet despite their critical interpretations and bid for distance from this symbolic emasculation, Asian-American men understand they are not immune to the disempowering and alienating portrayals of themselves. Subject to the triple consciousness I have proposed, they are hyper-aware of their irrevocable ties to these images in others' eyes, and how these emasculating stereotypes in turn shape how others view them. While Asian-American men attempt to assert their own identities, I contend that the necessity of always imagining the ways one is representing oneself, representing the group, is being represented by others, is being seen by others is emotionally exhausting. They must fight to preserve their own self-concepts and self-confidence or risk internalizing anger, shame and disgust and hegemonic views of themselves.

Further, it is apparent that to a great extent, subjects conceptualize media as undeniably and largely feeding into their marginalizing treatments within society—whether it is being mocked at a sporting try-out, taunted that they are less endowed, being relegated to the bottom of the dating pool or more implicitly, being treated as one-dimensional caricatures. Asian-American men by and large understand media as undesirably yet inescapably encoding their bodies with meanings that render their more nuanced identifications invisible.

As such, they endeavour to assert their masculinity and unique identifications against restraining stereotypes activated by media and reinforced by society. It is apparent that some choose to perform and represent their masculinity in certain ways, with the understanding that they themselves are group representations with the power to influence preconceptions at a micro-level. Others choose to redefine their masculinities and no longer seek legitimacy from the hegemony. However, it is crucial that we not romanticize this alienation and understand that this carving out of an alternative space is predicated on a very real cultural and systemic exclusion within American society, through American media. Aware that their precarious subject positions are victim to the disempowering gaze of society, Asian-American men nonetheless feel societal constraints and media rendering certain identities impossible for them. This tug-of-war between agency and hegemonic power can ultimately be painful and exhausting for some.

As such, I contend that across the board, Asian-American men yearn to be free: whether from others' racial biases, from stereotypes, from social constructs, from prescriptions of what a man is, from communities that exclude while still demanding assimilation. This ubiquitous craving for liberation attests to the toxic nature of media stereotypes which simultaneously alienate and restrain. It is my hope that this research has contributed an understanding of the more subdued and deep-rooted ways in which symbolic exclusion manifests itself.

With the hope of sparking change within the media industry itself and encouraging more positive, varied, three-dimensional and humanizing portrayals of Asian-American men, I propose that future research examine the institutional pressures and factors within American media institutions to deconstruct why Asian-American male representation has changed so little in the past century and identify the most productive avenues in which to effect change. Perhaps then, as Asian-American men brace themselves as they gaze at the screen, one day in the near future they can breathe a sigh of relief.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend a heartfelt word of thanks to the 23 kind, funny and perceptive Asian-American men who took the time to openly share their stories and observations with me—and in most cases, with a complete stranger. Your rich insights were invaluable in molding the content of this research. I'm well aware many of these experiences were not easy to share, and for your trust, I am sincerely grateful. Our time spent connecting, laughing, musing and dissecting continues to echo in my mind—and were it not for the word limit, I could have easily written an entire book overflowing with your unique voices, thought-provoking insights and the infinite nuances of the findings. It is my hope that you'll find this research a worthy investment of your time—and that together, we can spark awareness and change.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Profiles & Data Corpus Demographics

KEY

- **Pseudonym:** State they grew up in, Age*, Ethnicity, Occupation, Sexuality
*Age: Early 20's=20-23, Mid 20's=24-26, Late 20's=27-29

Interviewees

- **Lang:** Indiana, Mid 20's, Chinese, White-Collar, Straight
- **Lance:** Minnesota, Late 20's, Chinese, White-Collar, Straight
- **Allen:** California, Mid 20's, Taiwanese, White-Collar, Straight
- **Chris:** California, Mid 20's, Chinese, Postgraduate Student, Straight
- **Henry:** California, Mid 20's, Vietnamese, Postgraduate Student, Straight
- **Peter:** Missouri, Mid 20's, Chinese, White-Collar, Straight
- **David:** Michigan, Early 20's, Chinese, Undergraduate Student, Gay
- **Peng:** New York, Early 20's, Chinese, White-Collar, Straight
- **Shawn:** Ohio, Early 20's, half-Korean and half-Chinese, Undergraduate Student, Straight
- **Gary:** Louisiana, Mid 20's, Vietnamese, White-Collar, Gay
- **Will:** Oregon, Mid 20's, Mixed Vietnamese and Cambodian, White-Collar, Straight
- **Vincent:** New York, South Carolina, Early 20's, Chinese, Undergraduate Student, Straight
- **Fred:** Georgia, Early 20's, Chinese, Undergraduate Student, Straight
- **Austin:** Colorado, Mid 20's, Filipino, White-Collar, Straight
- **Victor:** Michigan, Late 20's, Korean, White-Collar, Straight
- **Hugh:** California, Mid 20's, Chinese, White-Collar, Straight
- **Gaoxue:** Wisconsin, Early 20's, Hmong, Undergraduate Student, Straight
- **Timothy:** Nevada, Early 20's, Chinese, Undergraduate Student, Straight

- **Robert:** Arizona, California; Mid 20's, Chinese, White-Collar, Straight
- **Matt:** Tennessee, Mid 20's, Vietnamese, White-Collar, Straight
- **Ben:** North Carolina, Late 20's, Taiwanese, White-Collar, Straight
- **Walter:** Texas, New Jersey; Early 20's, Chinese, White-Collar, Straight
- **Lewis:** Texas, Late 20's, Taiwanese, Postgraduate Student, Straight

Data Corpus Demographics

- 9 grew up in the Western region, 7 in the Midwest, 5 in the South and 2 in the Northeast. Cumulatively, they have lived in 22 states throughout their lives.
- 8 were in their early 20s (21-23), 11 were in their mid-20s (24-26) and 4 were in their late 20s (27-29). The mean age was 23.8.
- 2 were gay, which is fairly in line with the ratios of the overall population.
- With the exception of 3 interviewees who immigrated to the U.S. at age 3, all were born and raised in America.
- 12 identified as Chinese, 3 as Taiwanese, 3 as Vietnamese, 1 as Filipino, 1 as Hmong, 1 as Korean, 1 as half-Chinese and half-Korean, and 1 as mixed Vietnamese and Cambodian.
- Most of the interviewees were second-generation Asian-Americans, with their parents being immigrants, except for 2 interviewees who each had one immigrant parent and one parent who had grown up in the U.S.
- The sample contained 14 white-collar workers, 6 undergraduate students, and 3 postgraduate students.

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