

Diversifying Representations of Asian Americans in Mainstream Media

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A lack of Asian representation in Hollywood is a crucial problem. In particular, stereotypes of Asian characters have been perpetuated in the production of movies. Hollywood often promotes a negative image of Asians, and that image is often emphasized when white actors are selected in Asian roles. Asians are often depicted as one dimensional characters such as servants and coolies (Lee). The most controversial film was *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932) based on a novel by Sax Rohmer. Dr. Fu Manchu is a villain who conspires to destroy the ruling system of the Western world. He is smart and wise, but in a stereotyped way. Also, he is cunning and brutal and speaks broken English (Lee). Such "Whitewashing" still continues in modern times. "Whitewashing" is defined as "portraying (the past) in a way that increases the prominence, relevance, or impact of white people and minimizes or misrepresents that of nonwhite people" (Merriam-Webster). For instance, Scarlett Johanson plays a Japanese woman in *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), a popular Japanese manga series. Emma Stone plays a character of a quarter

Hawaiian and daughter of a half Asian father in *Aloha* (2015), an American comedy movie. According to the article "The Prevalence and Portrayal of Asian and Pacific Islanders Across 1,300 Popular Films," there were only 22 Asians & Pacific Islanders (API) actors across 1300 popular films between 2007 to 2019. It is necessary to create more and more roles with respect for the individual, rather than assigning characteristics based on a certain race.

The aim of this essay is to understand why Asian stereotypes have taken root deeply. Another purpose of this essay is to analyze the themes of a contemporary 2018 film and a 2020 drama that break away from racist representations. First, I will examine a history of discrimination against Asians, especially Chinese and Japanese, in the United States. Second, I will explain the importance of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) being a hit in Hollywood. Third, I will analyze the theme of *Crazy Rich Asians*. Fourth, I will explain the importance of the adaptation of *The Baby-Sitters Club* (2020) that was expanded to show cultural identity. Lastly, I will analyze Claudia Kishi who plays an Asian female role model in *The Baby-Sitters Club*. A lack of Asian representation in the media is a prominent important issue. Roles and characters with images that are biased by race have a negative impact on many people because representations in film can affect the way we view the world and those around it. *Crazy Rich Asians* was a milestone for many Asian Americans because the majority of the cast are Asian descent and it was distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures. The success of the film led to

the change of films featuring Asians, not only in movies but also on a platform such as Netflix. The Baby-Sitters Club was adapted by Netflix to show more diverse characters for a new generation of readers. Crazy Rich Asians and The Baby-Sitters Club have contributed to diversifying the representations of Asian Americans.

There is a long history of discrimination against Asians in the United States. First of all, during the first half of the 19th century, there was a big wave of Chinese immigration to the United States. Chinese immigrants obtained employment in agriculture, mining, and transcontinental railroad construction. It was the first time to construct the transcontinental railroad to connect the United States from east to west. The Central Pacific Railroad's directors wanted only white laborers, but the workforce was not enough. About 20,000 Chinese workers worked to build the railroad between 1863 and 1869. They were assigned the most dangerous work and earned 30% to 50% lower wages than white laborers. In spite of the treatments, Leland Stanford, the founder of the Central Pacific Railroad, told the 17th President Andrew Johnson that they were "quiet, peaceable, patient, industrious, and economical" (Chang). This resulted in taking white workers' jobs away and generated "Yellow Peril". Yellow Peril is defined as "a danger to Western civilization held to arise from expansion of the power and influence of eastern Asian peoples" (Merriam-Webster). The U.S. treated Asians, particularly Chinese immigrants, as a threat which would disrupt Western values such as democracy, Christianity, and technological inno-

vation (Bowling Green State University). There is another reason why Asian Americans were considered a threat to Americans. Some Americans felt uncomfortable with Chinese traditions. Chinese immigrants wore robes with loose sleeves, which is a traditional costume. Chinese men had hairstyles called queue. They shaved the front and side of their hair and braided the rest of the hair. Moreover, it was unfamiliar for Americans that men were willing to do household chores like laundry and food preparation because the housework was commonly supposed to be done by women at that time. Furthermore, white supremacists refused to have a child between a Chinese man and a white woman ("Asian Immigration: The 'Yellow Peril'"). These fears against Asians resulted in generating "Yellow Peril" and the approval of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. The Chinese Exclusion Act was the first and only law that suspended entry of a certain ethnic group. The act prohibited Chinese laborers who were defined as "both skilled and unskilled laborers and Chinese employed in mining" ("Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)"). Thus, few Chinese could immigrate to the United States under the law and were prevented from integrating into American society.

Speaking of Japanese, they were also targets of anti-Asian movement, Yellow Peril, and under the influence of discrimination against Chinese. It especially worsened as the Japanese thrived, moving from farm laborers to farms or small business owners. To make matters worse, on December 7, 1941, Japan attacked the naval base at Pearl Harbor in Honolulu. It was a devastating surprise attack and the U.S. declared the war. The

attack destroyed about 20 American ships and more than 300 airplanes. Also, 2,403 sailors, soldiers, and citizens were killed and 1,000 people were wounded (History.com). Although there was no evidence of sabotage or espionage by Japanese Americans, the FBI rounded them up without search or arrest warrants. Subsequently, many of them were placed into U.S. Justice Department internment camps. By presidential proclamations, Japanese Americans were identified as "enemy aliens" and subjected to the restrictions such as travels, job hours, and social gatherings (Exploring Japanese American Internment). On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066. The order authorized the army "... to prescribe military areas in such places and of such extent as he or the appropriate Military Commander may determine, from which any or all persons may be excluded,..." ("Executive Order 9066"). Although the order did not identify Japanese, it applied only to persons of Japanese descent. Japanese Americans were forcibly evacuated to "Assembly Centers". It was like a prison, and they lived in squalid conditions. Therefore, there is a long history of discrimination against Asians and these are related to the prejudice-based portrayal of Asians in the film.

Due to the negative effects of the war and regulations, Asian citizens were prevented from integrating into American society and prejudice against Asians began to be reflected in the media. Asian have been often portrayed as highly intelligent, weak, geeky, exotic, and incompetent. One of the reasons for these stereotypes is that Asian Americans are framed as a "model

minority" within American society. The term "model minority" was coined by sociologist William Peterson in a 1966 *The New York Times Magazine*. It can be defined as "minority groups that have ostensibly achieved a high level of success in contemporary US society" (Kasinitz 173). The cultural expectation because of the model minority stereotypes placed on individuals will be smart, wealthy, hard-working, self-reliant, submissive, and uncomplaining ("Model Minority Stereotype for Asian Americans"). In fact, Asians have the largest population growth in the United States. Some Asian origin groups have achieved economic and educational successes, but it varies widely by origin. A Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data shows that a median annual household income for Asians is \$85,800 in 2019, which is higher than a national median, \$61,800. But Indians and Filipinos are the only origins with incomes higher than the national median. Most of the other origin groups are below the national median. Additionally, the share of Asian Americans aged 25 and older with at least a bachelor's degree also varies widely by origin groups. Indian (75%) and Malaysian (65%) are much more advanced compared to Laotians (18%) and Bhutanese (15%). Thus, by believing the model minority that Asians are successful, it can produce harmful effects and lead to discrimination.

Crazy Rich Asians (2018) is the film that cracked open the unacceptable practice of whitewashing in Hollywood. The film has an all-Asian cast and creators. It has been 25 years to shoot a film with all-Asian cast by a major Hollywood studio, Warner

Bros. Pictures, since Disney made *The Joy Luck Club* in 1993. According to Rotten Tomatoes, one of the most popular recommendation resources for movies around the world, the Tomatometer score reaches 90% by film and television critics. Furthermore, it grossed over 238 million dollars, which made it the 40th highest-grossing film released in 2018 with 73.2 percent of the box office by the United States (Box Office Mojo by IMDbPro). Plus, according to Gretchen Smail, an entertainment journalist, at *The Guardian*, "Crazy Rich Asians is not a perfect film, but it has the potential to open doors for more Asian-led projects" (Smail). It is so unusual that a film features an Asian protagonist. Therefore, it was a great step to apply many Asian American actors and provide them roles that are not based on stereotypes.

Jon M. Chu and Kevin Kwan created *Crazy Rich Asians* with the substantial intention of bringing Asian representation to the mainstream. The romantic comedy film was directed by Jon M. Chu, an American director and screenwriter, based on the novel by Kevin Kwan, a Singapore-born American novelist. He published *Crazy Rich Asians* in 2013 based on his childhood in Singapore and followed up the novel with *China Rich Girlfriend* in 2015 and *Rich People Problems* in 2017. As a unit, the trilogy has over 3 million copies in North America (Cadden). Kevin Kwan had a specific goal in the production of the movie: "I wanted to introduce a contemporary Asia to a North American audience" (Govani). Additionally, Jon M. Chu and Kevin Kwan spent a long time searching Asian actors who speak English

(Smail). Jon M. Chu offered actors to portray "a way we haven't ever seen Asians before", which are "Contemporary, stylish, at the top of art and fashion, emotional, funny, sarcastic and unapologetic. Confident" (Sun and Ford). Nevertheless, Jon M. Chu was originally offered from Netflix with significantly surpassing Warner Brother's money, he turned the proposal down. According to Extended Interview: 'Crazy Rich Asians' Actors And Director Discuss Film's Impact of NBC Nightly News, he told "we knew the importance of the project was to get it on the big screen - there's a sign there that says 'we are worth that energy, we are worth your time' - for a big Hollywood studio to send that message, we knew was an important message to send the world." Jon M. Chu knows that the contents children watch have an impact on them, so it means so much to show "strong independent people that don't need a man in their life to be fulfilled, and that love themselves and know that they're worth every inch of their existence, and can be anything and do whatever they want." (Yamato). He shows the audience contemporary images of Asians and hopes to give inspiration to other storytellers.

In this film, Rachel and Eleanor depict a contrast of Chinese and American values affected by differences in society and culture. Rachel Chu, a Chinese American woman, accompanies Nick Young, her boyfriend, to attend his best friend's wedding in Singapore. She doesn't know much about his background, but it turns out that his family is extremely wealthy. Eleanor Young, his mother, doesn't feel happy with their relationship. Rachel

pursues her dream while Eleanor prioritizes her family's tradition. Rachel is an economics professor of New York University raised by a working class mother who immigrated from China. When Rachel meets Eleanor for the first time and introduces her mother, she says "She knows that I'm passionate about what I do and she's always wanted that for me" (0:40:14-17). In response to this, Eleanor says "Pursuing one's passion... how American" (0:40:19-22). Rachel's mother let her do whatever she wanted to try. On the other hand, Eleanor studies law, but withdraws from university when she gets married. She chooses to help her husband run a business and to raise a family instead of chasing her dream. Eleanor says, "For me, it was a privilege. But for you, you may think it's old-fashioned" (1:10:12-17). Therefore, diversity of culture and values allows Asian and Asian American characters to bring intercommunity conversations out.

The last scene featuring Astrid Leong, played by Gemma Chan, represents female empowerment. Astrid Leong is introduced as a fashionable cousin of Nick Young. Her husband is Michael Teo, a captain in the army turned businessman, played by Pierre Png. The Leongs are one of the wealthiest old money families. She loves buying the latest designer clothes and jewelry. However, she has her maids hide all costly purchases from him because she tries to avoid making him feel inferior, which comes from an economic disparity between them. At the beginning of the film, he arrives home late because of being stuck in a meeting. She reminds him of the wedding festivities next week. She says, "Nick and his new girlfriend will be there. You'll like

her." After Michael says, "Oh, yeah? Why? 'Cause she's a commoner like me?" (0:24:24-33), suggesting that he thinks he is not suitable for her and her family. At the end of the film, Astrid and Michael break up because of his affair. When she leaves home, she says "Hidden my shoes, turned down jobs, charity work, worrying that it might make you feel lesser than." "But I've just realized, it's not my job to make you feel like a man. I can't make you something you're not" (1:47:32-56). This suggests that it is unnecessary that women should make men look better and she can take control of their lives and environments. Thus, the last scene with Astrid offers an image of a powerful and independent Asian woman.

The Baby-sitters Club series is one of best-selling children's books. It was written by Ann M. Martin published by Scholastic Corporation from 1986 to 2000 and sold over 180 million copies (Elliot). The Baby-Sitters Club (2020) is an American comedy drama created by Rachel Shukert and based on the series. The drama tells the story of girls in middle school who run a babysitting service called "The Baby-Sitters Club," targeting local kids in their neighborhood in the fictional suburban town, Stoneybrook, Connecticut. It takes place in a contemporary setting with the four core members. They are Kristy Thomas (Sophie Grace), the president and founder of the club, Mary Anne Spier (Malia Baker), the shy secretary of the club, Claudia Kishi (Momona Tamada), the Japanese American vice president of the club, and Stacey McGill (Shay Rudolph), the treasurer of the club who is from The Upper West Side of Manhattan.

The adaptation of Ann M. Martin's books was of paramount importance in terms of showing Japanese cultural identity. The rough plotlines follow the original books, but there are some modern updates such as a parent remarrying, a transgender child, an overprotective father, and childhood diabetes. Naia Cucukov, one of the executive producers of *The Baby-Sitters Club* drama series, was keen to include Japanese heritage into the show (NBC Asian America). As an active board member of Coalition of Asian Pacifics in Entertainment, which "champions diversity by educating, connecting, and empowering Asian American and Pacific Islander artists and leaders in entertainment and media." (CAPE), she is passionate about helping to make movies and televisions more diverse. In particular, there is an authentic representation of Japanese heritage through the Kishi family. Firstly, people always take their shoes off when they are at the Kishi's house. Not only their family but also the club members take their shoes off at Claudia's room where the baby-sitters club meeting is held. Secondly, Mimi teaches Claudia how to make tea, which is another Japanese tradition. At the beginning of episode 7 season 2, Claudia tries to make tea in the traditional Japanese way, but Mimi points out Claudia because she does not warm a cup first. Mimi says "It doesn't matter how it feels. It's important to do. Important now to show guest you honor them" (01:06-12). Mimi's idea is based on the Japanese spirit of hospitality, and this scene suggests how tradition is passed on to the next generation. What is more, Kishis conduct Mimi's funeral in the Buddhist way. Before Mimi dies,

she orders her urn from Japan a few months ago because a cinerary urn is used to contain the remains. Additionally, Claudia's parents decide there are no guests until finishing the funeral because it is a meditative period. After the funeral, there is a shot to show koden. Claudia explains "That's koden, Japanese mourning gifts of money sent by family and friends. Now my mom will have to send notes and return gifts back to the people who sent it" (11:21-30, episode 7, season 2). Lastly, Claudia makes envelopes with Mizuhiki, a string to decorate gifts and envelopes with a range of colors and knots that are used in respective settings, to invite her family and friends to talk about Mimi. Mizuhiki has the meaning of strongly binding people together, so it suggests that now Claudia loses Mimi who understands her the most and sends Mizuhiki with the intention of uniting once again to overcome their grief.

Moreover, the show was expanded to discuss the experiences of Claudia's grandmother, Makiko Yamamoto usually called Mimi, in an internment camp during World War II with episode six of season one. When Mimi has a stroke and is taken to the hospital, she develops aphasia which is having trouble with spoken language. In the scene of Claudia visiting Mimi in the hospital, Mimi says "Peach. No, no, peach, no. Where? Where? No, no house! No horse!" (11:36-45, Season 1-6), suggesting that she remembers the memories of an internment camp. Mimi is put in Manzanar, the actual prison camp for Japanese American in California for three years because Japanese Americans were classified as enemy aliens. In the camp, she sleeps in horse stalls

and eats horrible foods like rotten Vienna sausage and frozen canned peaches. To keep saying "no" proves that these environments are a nightmare for her. The backstory of Mimi was created for the new show. Actually, Takayo Tsubouchi Fischer, who played Mimi, was forced into an internment camp in California when she was nine years old (Bogan). Naia Cucukov, the show's executive producer, says "We knew that there were still ancestors that had gone through that experience. So it's really important to us that we all represent that correctly" (NBC News).

Claudia Kishi, the Japanese American vice president of the baby-sitters club, gives a stunning performance as a female role model beyond restrictive stereotypes of Asian Americans. She stands out because she breaks all the minority stereotypes that tend to be used for Asian Americans. According to the survey from the University of Southern California with funding by Amazon Studios, 67% of API characters reflect stereotyped tropes across 1300 top movies between 2007 to 2019. In *The Claudia Kishi Club*, a Netflix original documentary, Sarah Kuhn says "Whereas I feel like Claudia is the one everyone seems to want to be." For instance, she is cool enough to have hollowed-out books to hide snacks and a private landline in her room. There are another three reasons. Firstly, she is a fashionista. She is acknowledged for her extreme sense of fashion and has confidence for it. Mary Anne says, "Claudia is a style icon" (00:20-21, episode 4, season 1). Her closet is full of clothes and she wears different clothes every day with jewelry that she

makes. For any woman of color, it is unusual to be fashionable. Secondly, she is not good at studying. She gets terrible grades in school and is often called to attention by her parents and teachers. Lastly, she is an artist. Art is the most enthusiastic thing in her life. At the beginning of episode 2, she says "But most of all, I'm good at art. Great, actually. There's no homework in art class, no tests. When I'm painting or sculpting, all the little voices telling me what I should be doing and who I'm supposed to be go away" (00:30-44). Also, she is chosen as an official artist in the Eastern Connecticut District Art Show. Thus, unlike the stereotyped character, Claudia Kishi, who is fashion-forward, bad at studying, and creative, brings a new Asian American identity.

In conclusion, this paper discusses the roots of discrimination against Chinese and Japanese Americans and analyzes a 2018 film and a 2020 drama that break away from racist representations. First, a number of events in the 19th century led to discrimination against Chinese and Japanese Americans. Due to an immense wave of Chinese immigration, Chinese workers sharply increased and worked hard even though they earned lower wages than American workers. The US treated them as a threat that would destroy the nation because of their diligence and unfamiliar traditions. The Japanese were also targets of an anti-Asian movement, Yellow Peril. The attack on Pearl Harbor spurred the US to identify Japanese as "enemy aliens". Japanese Americans were forced into internment camps. The image of Asians was created by not only history but also model minorities and

reflected in the media. However, in recent years, some films have enhanced the Asian representation. *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) was created featuring an entirely Asian cast for the first time in 25 years. The film was based on a strong production intention of Kevin Kwan and Jon M. Chu to introduce contemporary Asia to America. They wanted to show Asians who are contemporary, stylish, and emotional. With an all-Asian cast, the film could portray the distinction between Asians and Asian Americans, which is rarely explored. The adaptation of *The Baby-Sitters Club* (2020) depicts an authentic Japanese family, the Kishis. The drama was expanded to discuss the time when Japanese Americans were put into internment camps during World War II. Moreover, Claudia Kishi breaks the mold of female Asian American character. She is stylish, bad at studying, and a great artist. Asians are not only underrepresented quantitatively, but also qualitatively stereotyped in film. Stereotyped storytelling and portrayal of Asians would commit to people's perceptions, prejudice, and attitudes. It is crucial to show unbiased Asian characters in the mainstream. The success of *Crazy Rich Asians* and *The Baby-Sitters Club* has contributed to diversifying the representations of Asian Americans and inspire more Asian creators and actors to come forward.

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