# Where Is He?!: Asian/American Representation in Netflix Original Programming

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## Introduction

"Where is he?!" The title of this study comes from a quote spoken by none other than myself. It's a Monday afternoon, right in the thick of quarantine. I'm towards the end of coding my sample, and my brain is truly exhausted. I keep scanning, scanning, scanning the screen, when the words slip out of my mouth in pure frustration: "WHERE IS HE?!"

My hands motion at the screen. My eyes, manic, turn over to my brother, who is about to microwave his lunch. He gives an awkward grin, no clue as to who I am talking about. "Antarctica?" he replies, trying to get me to smile. I'm deep in my research though, unable to fully appreciate the joke, and wave furiously again at the screen. "IMDb told me there were two Asian guys in this movie." The movie is *The Perfect Date* (2019), one of the many romantic comedies Noah Centineo has starred in for Netflix. "I found one. Where is the other?!"

Five minutes later, I finally find him, my elusive mystery man: he appears for 10 seconds in the beginning half of the movie to look up before silently and disinterestedly checking out Noah Centineo's fly new clothes. We never hear him speak once, and we never see him again. We never even find out if he has a name.

A now humorous anecdote shows a broader picture of this study. After all, rhetoric, as defined by Mao & Young (2008), is not just words, but a "knowledge-making process . . . situated in every specific occasion of language use . . . [and] always socially and politically constructed" (p. 4). As a person of Asian American descent, and a scholar of Asian American history and media studies, I am desperately searching for the characters that the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) claims are there. With Covid-19 exacerbating historical and contemporary anti-Asian sentiments and harassment, humane and prominent representation of Asian and Asian American people is increasingly important to shift away from a narrative of dehumanization. But in the end, it's a game of racially charged Where's Waldo: the Asian and Asian American characters are near impossible to find, and my eyes are hurting from how hard I have to search.

There is a special type of disappointment that comes with this because media and Hollywood, just like language at large, "provides the possibility to realize the rhetorical construction of identity and write oneself literally into the pages of

history and culture" (p. 6). Netflix, a new Hollywood innovation, is rising in prominence due to recent stay at home orders and is ripe with opportunity for fresh, diverse programs that could allow for Asian Americans to write themselves into America's pages, if they are given the platform. In this study, the primary methodology of content analysis provides definitive numbers to inform ongoing conversations surrounding representation of Asian Americans in Hollywood; the secondary methodology of autoethnography adds my own experiences as an Asian American, watching people like myself being represented on screen.

There is good reason to be hopeful about Netflix: some great films like *Always Be My Maybe* (2019), *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018), *Over the Moon* (2020) and television shows such as *Never Have I Ever* (2020) and *The Babysitter's Club* (2020) have been produced. Beyond these exceptions though, highlighted by Netflix's algorithms, the same problems persist. Many roles for Asians and Asian Americans are fleeting and one-dimensional, more breadcrumbs than fully developed characters, while white actors are given numerous bread loaves. More often than not, they are the supplements to a white protagonist's overall arc (or on other occasions, obstacles complicating it). We are still caught up in what Ono and Pham (2009) define as media racial hegemony: "a particular way of thinking about race exists within and across media . . . [that] guides and regulates beliefs and actions of those within society" (p. 191). As a consumer and a researcher, I am finding myself still asking: WHERE IS HE?!

**Literature Review**

*Theoretical Framework*

Critical to the theoretical foundation of my study is Avery Gordon's (1997) concept of haunting, a sociological and psychological phenomenon that occurs when systems of oppression are not properly addressed by society. Each time the haunting is not addressed, the ideas it perpetuates are further "encoded" and "cultivated" into the cultural psyche. I discovered Gordon's work through Chiwen Bao's 2009 article "Haunted," which analyzes the factors behind Dave Chappelle's sudden hiatus from comedy in the mid-2000s. Bao found that despite Dave Chappelle's efforts to use satire to critique racist dialogues and ideas, the unresolved history of slavery and minstrelsy overshadowed his attempts. Though chattel slavery may be officially over, the lack of discussion around the impacts of slavery and the images produced from slavery and minstrelsy still subconsciously perpetuate those ideas. In fact, Bao claims, the reason why Chappelle might have gained prominence in the first place is because of the awful, subconscious pleasure that hegemonic American audiences felt from these images.

This study is also influenced by Seo-Young Chu's work on uncanny valley. Uncanny valley is the theory that people will respond well to humanlike beings up until around 85 percent similarity. Upon reaching this point, sympathy mutates into revulsion, only ascending again upon reaching 100 percent humanlike status. For that brief period between 85 and 100 percent similarity, people hold "uncertainty over whether a 'type' of person is genuinely human or alive" (Chu, 2015, p. 78). Consequently, many tend to reject and even attack that which, to them, is not quite human and therefore not sympathetic. The shape of the curve on the graph looks like a valley (p. 76). Chu argues that this theory, originally applied to robots, also applies to Asian American stereotypes, as stereotypes "enable . . . psychological shortcuts that relieve [someone] of the inconvenience of devoting full attention to the irreducibly complex reality of other humans' quirks," ambitions, and dreams (p. 77). This is a view also shared by Pham and Ono (2008). As such, under this theory, it is easier for Hollywood creatives to rely on the stereotypes of Asian Americans cultivated over long histories of war and racism than undergo that inconvenience of creating full-fledged characters and storylines.

## Asian American Representation

There are four key terms to keep in mind before reading my analysis: orientalism, model minority, yellow peril, and perpetual foreigner syndrome. There are also three specific pieces of legislation that have defined the boundaries and perceptions of Asian America throughout our country's history, and consequently their presence in public life and media: The Page Act of 1875, the Chinese Exclusion Act, and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. While these are not the only pieces of legislation and history that have shaped Asian America, they are the ones most pertinent to my study. It is important to know what they entail, because as Gordon (2008) writes in *Ghostly Matters*, unacknowledged and consequently unresolved racist histories find ways to persist and haunt us even now in the present.

## Historical Background

The Page Act of 1875 occurs first chronologically and serves as a precursor to the Chinese Exclusion Act, which is signed into law in 1882. Reacting to white Americans' fear that Chinese and East Asian immigrants would steal their jobs, The Page Act banned "undesirable" workers, one of which was specifically prostitutes. As a result, the act most effectively banned women, with immigration officers deeming all East Asian women immigrating as prostitutes and sending them back. Thus, combined with a rise in anti-miscegenation laws, we see a culture of bachelorhood and arguably the *de*-sexualization of Chinese and Asian men, who were still able to immigrate but could not settle down with a family and therefore join American society (African American Policy Forum, n.d.). Simultaneously, we also arguably see the *hyper*sexualization of Asian women, which leads to stereotypes in media persistent until today, such as the geisha

(sexual, subservient, submissive), the dragon lady (sexual, fierce, to be conquered), and others (Shimizu, 2007).

The Chinese Exclusion Act was the first piece of legislation that banned *all* members of a nation or ethnic group from immigrating to America. Like the Page Act, it was also inspired by white Americans' fears of job sparsity (AAPF, n.d.). This legislation would remain in place until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which completely overturned the quota system and replaced it with our current system, allowing large waves of immigrants to finally come to this country ("U.S. Immigration since 1965," 2019). My own mother and her family were some of those immigrants.

## Critical Asian American Studies Terms

I outline these pieces of legislation because they not only determined who could come into this country, but also perpetuated, animated, and affirmed stereotypes Americans may have already had about Asians and Asian Americans, as well as inspired new stereotypes and depictions. Hence, my four key terms: orientalism, yellow peril, model minority, and perpetual foreigner syndrome. Orientalism is a term derived from the history of West's racist conceptualization of "the Orient," a figure

> not only adjacent to Europe; [but] also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the other. . . . the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. (Said, 1978, p. 9)

The Orient was not simply a tragic casualty of Western racism, but rather an intentional victim of exploitation by (white) Westerners. It is important to recognize this because Asians and Asian Americans are whole people who deserve to be more than a plot device in someone else's character arc.

From orientalism stems two of my other key terms: yellow peril and perpetual foreigner syndrome. In an American context, the yellow peril trope is of depraved Asian American heathens coming to undermine America and everything it stands for (Marchetti, 1993, p. 2). This image is most blatantly obvious in past anti-immigration propaganda and the present-day administration's reaction to Covid-19, but the trope appears in Hollywood media again and again, depending on which Asian nation America is warring against at the time. The most critical component of the yellow peril trope is the duplicity that comes with it: the yellow peril lulls the Western characters into a state of trust, before betraying them and taking over everything the West holds dear. Perpetual foreigner syndrome refers to the trope of Asian Americans never being represented as *full American citizens*, even if they have been born and raised on American soil (Huynh et al., 2011). The last of my key terms, model minority, also stems from orientalism.

This trope portrays Asian Americans as a "model minority" for their educational success, work ethic, and lack of involvement in crime. The model minority stereotype goes as far as to say that Asians are honorary white people but never accepts them as full members of American society (Rim, 2007). After all, they may be the model minority, but the yellow peril runs through their veins, waiting to be activated. "In exchange for [this] conditional status, Asian American 'model minorities' perform cheer, dedication, and team spirit to maintain the affective economy" they will never be allowed to truly take space and participate in (Yoon, 2008, p. 296). By employing this stereotype, the diversity of the Asian American community and its struggles surrounding housing and workplace discrimination, immigration, and many other issues are erased. The model minority stereotype is also used to pit Asian Americans against other minorities, thereby preventing them from forming coalitions and acting in solidarity against the racist systems they all are harmed by. Now that these key terms and pieces of history have been defined, our focus turns to what specific research has been produced on Asian American media representations.

## Review of Existing Research Literature

As Asian American representations in media are often presented in gendered and sexualized ways, much work has been done already on representations of Asian/Asian Americans. Numerous authors (Shimizu, 2007; Marchetti, 1993; Yoon, 2008) have utilized qualitative methodologies such as autoethnography and textual analysis to examine the dragon lady, the lotus blossom, and the other different ways Asian and Asian American women (stylized as Asian/American by Palumbo-Liu [1999] and Shimizu [2007][1]) are treated and often hypersexualized within different media, how these images can *em*power as well as *dis*empower Asian and Asian/American women. Rather than simplistically condemning these images, the authors take a more nuanced approach through the theory of the bind of representation for Asian/American women, keeping in mind how, "love her or leave her, the hypersexual Asian woman in representation haunts the experiences and perceptions of Asian Women" (Shimizu, 2007, p. 16). By acknowledging this, we can have a more effective response to Asian/American representation going forward.

Along with Asian/American femininity and womanhood, there have also been many studies on Asian/American masculinity and manhood. We see the hegemonic impressions of Asian/American masculinity manifest into two figures: Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan. Fu Manchu serves as the literal personification of yellow peril, and "if you take the Chineseness away, there is nothing left of him" (p. 2). He is not only defined by his physical characteristics, but also by his technological and scientific prowess, deceitful nature, and cruelty. Fu Manchu

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[1] Palumbo-Liu and Shimizu write the term in this way to acknowledge and represent how Asian Americans are frequently conflated with Asians, a symptom of perpetual foreigner syndrome. From this point forward, I adopt this stylization for the sake of my own study and thesis, as these issues around representations remain the same even now – perhaps, in light of rising anti-Asian sentiments due to Covid-19.

runs many criminal enterprises and desires to conquer the (Western) world; though why he wishes to is never explained (Mayer, 2014). Charlie Chan is Fu Manchu's opposite—goofy, chubby, always with a helpful Confucian proverb up his sleeve. Chan has been seen by many Asian/American activists as a mortifying Uncle Tom, the model minority to Fu Manchu's yellow peril (Richards, 2017).

In addition to how gender roles affect individual Asian/Americans, scholarship has been conducted on how these roles appear in interpersonal relationships, particularly interracial ones (and for the most part, scholarship has prioritized representations of cisgender-heterosexual depictions of sexuality). The characters entangled within these depicted relationships serve as proxies for both the more abstract Eastern/Western international relationships and the tangible anxieties from this fear of yellow peril that bleed into everyday relationships (Marchetti, 1993).

Beyond gender roles, we read into different genres that Asian/Americans have appeared in or influenced. While not direct depictions of Asian/Americans characters themselves, this branch of research only underscores the pressing need for better Asian/American representation. Asian countries and cultures have already contributed to Hollywood by providing "sheer eye candy" as filmmaker William Gibson once put it (as cited in Roh et al., 2015, p. 9); Asian/Americans deserve the social and financial capital that comes with proper representation. In addition to studies with a broader focus, there are many qualitative articles on specific iconic Asian/American figures and media such as *Mulan* (Dong, 2006) and Glenn Rhee of *The Walking Dead* (Ho, 2016). All provide important insights, but where this study differs is the broadness of its ultimate focus on Netflix's (and thus theoretically, Hollywood's) library as a whole.

### Hollywood and Seriality

Why turn an eye to Hollywood? This study examines Hollywood and Netflix specifically because both are parts of a larger everyday rhetoric that serve to discuss and define dominant discourses about Asian/Americans (Mao & Young, 2008). However, Hollywood's tendency to focus on the interpersonal obscures the sociopolitical environments these relationships take place in (Marchetti, 1993). It is also an industry based on seriality, the reliance "on iconicity, on emblematic constellations, and on recognizable images, figures, plots, phrases, and accessories that, once established, can be rearranged, reinterpreted, recombined, and invested with new significance" (Mayer, 2014, p. 11). Through serialized figures, tropes are established that Hollywood creatives may draw upon, subconsciously or overtly, when writing to easily establish the parameters of the (white) hero's situation and the gravity of their success or failure. They provide shortcuts that allow Hollywood creatives to not develop these supporting roles further, thus allowing "the residual effects of these historical strategies . . .

[to] continue to shape and structure the representation of [Asian/Americans] in the future" (Ono & Pham, 2009, p. 2).

*Content Analysis*

There are few content analyses about Asian/American representation, and none published on Netflix. Many of the studies that do focus on this subject focused on the mediums of newspapers (Wu & Izard, 2008; Rim, 2007; Oh & Katz, 2009). There were only three studies on race in *primetime* television (Deo, et al., 2008; Signorielli, 2009; Tukachinsky et al., 2015). Even within these studies, characters of color were lumped together, without a specific study on Asian/Americans, by nature ignoring how all communities of color may have different needs from one another. The one exception is Deo et al. (2008), which focuses on Asian/Americans during 2004/2005 primetime television. As the researchers articulate, the lack of Asian/American characters found prevented the audience from seeing Asian/Americans in "the fabric of everyday American life" (p. 152). As 15 years has passed, it is worth seeing what depictions are on currently popular programs, and whether streaming provides more opportunities for Asian/Americans than traditional networks do.

**Methodology**

*Sampling*

The process for collecting a sample was random. The first task was to compile a list of Netflix's American-produced original television programs. Specifically, I drew from Netflix's live-action comedy and drama programs, excluding reality programs, nonfiction programs, and children's programs, as they use different storytelling mechanisms and narrative beats.[2] While an argument can be made to focus on only television or film programs, streaming platforms are blurring the lines between these two mediums. The flexibility and consequent freedom of streaming have made the biggest difference now between film and television an individual program's length.

There were 337 items in the list, meaning there were 337 programs to choose from. The website www.randomnumbergenerator.org was then utilized. For the first round, 20 numbers were drawn. The goal was to get 30 different programs so a second coder and I could code as many different programs as possible within one semester. Duplicates were automatically discarded. I then went to the

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[2] The list was curated on February 2020 through Wikipedia, thus excluding series like *The Babysitter's Club* (2020) and *Never Have I Ever* (2020), which came out later. As this study focused on Asian/Americans, we excluded K-Dramas and other foreign-produced Netflix Originals. Considering the limited scope of this study, and how reality television and nonfiction shows use less of a traditional "narrative" than that of fictional live-action comedies and dramas, they were excluded. As children's programs are created with different audiences in mind, they were also excluded.

IMDb pages of each program to see if they had any Asian/American[3] actors in their cast, looking at headshots and names. Through this method, I was able to find all regular, recurring, and guest characters. I was not able to find information on extras. Only programs containing at least one Asian/American character were kept in the sample. All other programs were noted for their lack of roles but coded no further.

Once programs were determined, the website was utilized again to determine which random episode I would watch, as well as which would be viewed by both my second coder and me. Only one episode from television programs was watched to widen the study's scope. In instances where a program had more than one Asian/American character, we coded the four top-listed characters on IMDb. Consequently, the study would code for more than one episode if that second or even third episode contained one of the four top-listed characters.

*Coding Scheme*

The coding scheme consists of five levels of variables, with 55 variables total. For guidance on how to structure my coding scheme, I looked at Scharrer's (2012) prior content analysis.

The first level has one variable: the number of Asian/American characters in the program. If a program chosen in the sample has no Asian/American characters, my second coder or I would log a "0" and move on. If there were any Asian/American characters, we would record the number and move onto the next level of the coding scheme. The second level consists of variables on program demographics: the name of the program, the name of the episode (if applicable), the program airdate, genre, and format. The third was variables related to demographics: their name, their billed versus narrative role[4], ethnicity, gender, and occupation. Variables such as immigrant status, accent, and traditional dress were included to see how often Asian/American characters were depicted as more foreign. All variables were determined by the character verbally declaring these aspects of their identity or exhibiting visual cues.

Level four held the most potential for ambiguity, as it consisted of variables related to the character's personality. Variables were determined by drawing upon historical representations of Asian/Americans in American media to the following characteristics: prowess/success (an ability to achieve success in the following categories: education, business, STEM, humanities, and social skills), duplicity (lies, gives a false impression), ambition (desires to rise above their

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[3] For the sake of this study, we tried to be mindful of specific ethnicities within the labels of East Asian and South Asian. However, as American hegemony tends to lump all Asians together, this was not always possible.
[4] The concept of narrative role was drawn from Igartua et al. (2014). A narrative role is the role the character plays in the story—e.g. whether they were a protagonist (the hero of the story, who the audience is meant to sympathize with), the antagonist (the villain, who works against the hero's aims), a secondary or tertiary protagonist/antagonist, or a combination thereof.

station), selfishness (considers only their own wants or needs, extroverted (goes up to people and chats enthusiastically, befriends others easily, is open about their personal life), spirituality (believes specifically in "chi" and other spiritual forms associated with Eastern religions and philosophies), formal religion (strictly follows official religious practices), and displays emotions (displays the following emotions: happiness, sadness/grief, anger, fear, empathy/sympathy, guilt/remorse). To code these variables, the coders write yes, no, or unknown.

Level five variables related to the character's relationships with others. Many were drawn from Dillman Carpentier et al. (2017). We chose to focus on this aspect because as Deo et al. (2008) wrote, many Asian/American characters are not written to hold relationships in a way that allows them to build families and/or fold themselves into the fabric of American society. Within these variables were two categories: behaviors and conversations. In the former, attention was paid toward whether Asian/American characters engaged in dating/courtship behavior (a direct manifestation of changing the relationship in question [such as building or ending a relationship]), light kissing/touching (touching another's body in a way that was meant to be loving [e.g. light or closed-mouth kisses between partners]), physical flirting (behavior intended to promote sexual interest), passionate kissing, intimate touching (touching of another's body in a way meant to be sexually arousing), masturbation, implied intercourse (strong inferences that physical acts involving sex had occurred, were occurring, or would immediately occur), and depicted intercourse (a direct view was shown of any person engaged in sexual intercourse regardless of the degree of nudity shown), all with yes or no options. We also asked whether contraception was used, if the sexual acts were mundane or kinky (followed traditional norms of sexuality), what attitude the characters had towards sex (callous, casual, neutral, committed), and how explicitly naked they were. In the conversations category, we focused on whether Asian/American characters ever discuss these relationships, their histories, or even just said words that insinuated sex. In addition, a variable on who initiated the behaviors or conversations was included to see how much agency Asian/American characters have in these interactions.

To ensure that the coding scheme was applied reliably, I recruited a second coder, a Chinese woman in her late 50s unfamiliar with content analysis or the full scope of the study. After taking a half hour to explain the different variables, my second coder and I double-coded roughly 10% of the overall sample. Out of 55 variables, the second coder and I only disagreed on 12: Beauty (89% agreement), Business Prowess (67%), STEM Prowess (89%), Humanities Prowess (67%), Extroverted (89%), Anger (67%), Fear (78%), Physical Flirting (89%), Implied Intercourse (89%), Attitude Towards Sex (72%), and Explicit Nudity (93%). With our lowest average being only 67%, the coding scheme proved to be reliable. Consequently, if a variable is discarded, it is due to its (lack of) relevancy to the study rather than a statistical matter.

*Autoethnography*

In addition to the content analysis, autoethnography was incorporated as another, qualitative methodology for this study. For myself, I wrote down my personal gut reactions to what was on the screen in a separate document. My second coder is also Asian/American; consequently, I include her remarks in our discussion following the overlap sampling. Through these qualitative examples, I add a dimension to the quantitative data accrued through coding the texts. I made the decision to consider my personal subjectivity as someone who is of Asian/American descent, watching these Asian/American characters being depicted on screen. While content analysis is generally supposed to be objective, it is conducted by people with their own subjectivities, and I wanted to honor that as well as the numbers put forward by this study.

**Results**

*Coding*

To get a sample of 30 programs, I used the random number generating site several times. Ultimately, I had to draw 53 programs total because 23 of these programs (43.3%) did not have a single Asian/American character. Out of the 30 that did, 29.3% were comedies, 29.3% were dramas, and 41.5% were of indeterminable program genres. Fourteen of the programs were films, and 16 were television shows. Within the 30 programs, a total of 97 characters were coded. Sixty-nine of these characters had names they were addressed by (71%). For a visual breakdown of Asian/American character roles, see Figures 1 and 2.
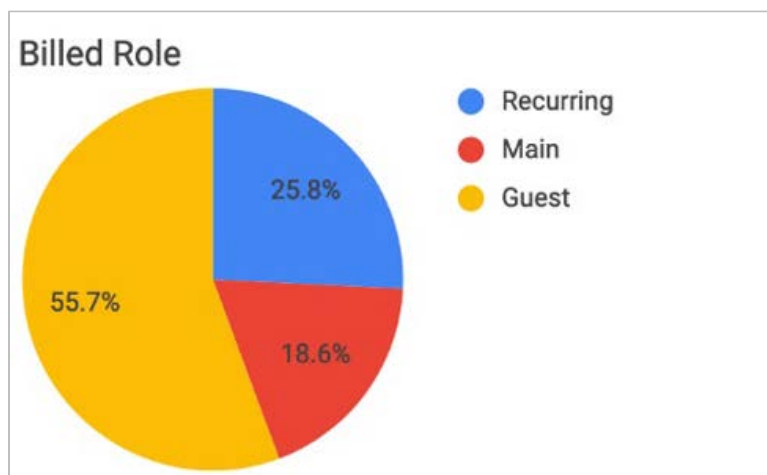


Figure 1: Asian/American Characters by Role Types: Billed Role
*Note*. Characters based on IMDb billing. *N* = 97; Main = 18 (18.6%),
Recurring = 25 (25.8%), Guest = 54 (55.7%).

The most common ethnicities of the characters were Unspecified East Asian (40.2%), Unspecified South Asian (21.6%), and Korean (12.6%). Gender was almost evenly split between cisgender women (50.5%) and cisgender men (49.5%). While immigrant status of most characters were unspecified (77.3%), if it was specified, it was an immigrant (7.2%), rather than someone who was second/third generation (0%).
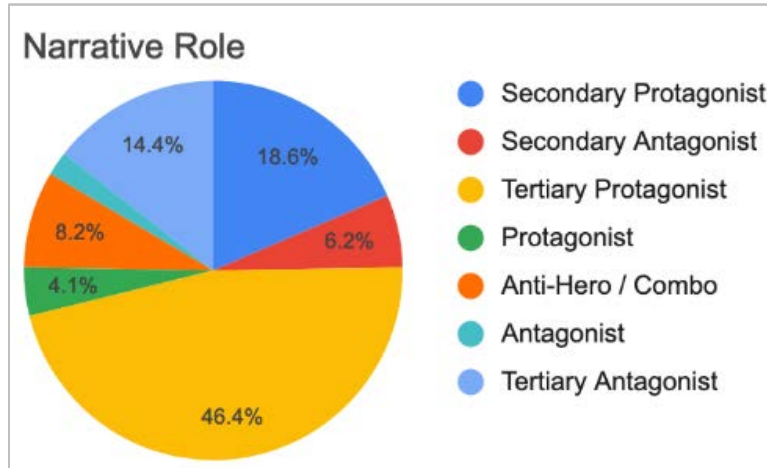


Figure 2: Asian/American Characters by Role Types: Narrative Role
*Note*. Characters based on their role in the program. N = 97; Protagonist = 4 (4.1%), Antagonist = 2 (2.1%), Secondary Protagonist = 18 (18.6%), Secondary Antagonist = 6 (6.2%), Tertiary Protagonist = 45 (46.4%), Tertiary Antagonist = 14 (14.6%), Anti-Hero / Combo = 8 (8.2%).

If jobs were specified (37 out of 97 were not), the most common were doctor and nurse. The next most common were spa workers. Following this, a majority of positions were under the pink collar/reproductive labor category. See Table 1.

| # of Characters | Occupation |
| --- | --- |
| 37 | N/A |
| 5 | Doctor, Nurse |
| 4 | Spa Technicians |
| 3 | Cashier, Royalty, Unspecified Office Jobs |
| 2 | Businessmen, Celebrity Chef, Criminal, Farmer, Heating/Technician, News Host, Police Officer, Restaurant Owner, Teacher, Wrestler |
| 1 | Activist, Canoe Instructor, College Admissions Officer, Customs Officer, Director, Director's Assistant, Engineer, FBI Agent, Laundromat Owner, Rabbi, Screenwriter, Socialite, Stripper, Therapist, Valet, Web Designer |

Table 1: Occupations of Asian/American Characters Coded

With personality variables, the most commonly coded answer was "Unknown," meaning that the character was not on screen long enough for anything about the proposed personality variables to be discerned. Consequently, we see a range from 17.5% (Extroverted) to 75.3% (Formal Religion) and 83.5% (Humanities Prowess) of characters coded as "Unknown," meaning they were not fleshed out enough to determine whether they held that personality trait or not. The largest number of definitive codes for personality variables was 61.9% (Extroverted, Y). See Table 2.

| Personality Traits | Were Characters Depicted as Such? | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Y | N | Unknown |
| Duplicity | 23 (23.7%) | 37 (38.1%) | 37 (38.1%) |
| Ambition | 17 (17.5%) | 17 (17.5%) | 63 (64.9%) |
| Selfishness | 28 (28.9%) | 23 (23.7%) | 46 (47.4) |
| Extroverted | 60 (61.9%) | 20 (20.6%) | 17 (17.5%) |
| Spirituality | 4 (4.1%) | 22 (22.7%) | 71 (73.2%) |
| Formal Religion | 2 (2.1%) | 22 (22.7%) | 73 (75.3%) |
| Prowess – Education | 8 (8.2%) | 12 (12.4%) | 77 (79.4%) |
| Prowess – Business | 18 (18.8%) | 8 (8.3%) | 70 (72.9%) |
| Prowess - STEM | 15 (15.5%) | 10 (10.3%) | 72 (74.2%) |
| Prowess - Humanities | 13 (13.4%) | 3 (3.1%) | 81 (83.5%) |
| Prowess - Social Skills | 60 (61.9%) | 24 (24.7%) | 13 (13.4%) |
| Displays Emotions - Happiness | 57 (58.8%) | 36 (37.1%) | 4 (4.1%) |
| Displays Emotions - Sadness/Grief | 30 (30.9%) | 62 (63.9%) | 5 (5.2%) |
| Displays Emotions - Anger | 28 (28.9%) | 65 (67.0%) | 4 (4.1%) |
| Displays Emotions - Fear | 24 (24.7%) | 69 (71.1%) | 4 (4.1%) |
| Displays Emotions - Empathy/Sympathy | 42 (43.8%) | 51 (53.1%) | 3 (3.1%) |
| Displays Emotions - Guilt/Remorse | 14 (14.4%) | 77 (79.4%) | 6 (6.2%) |

Table 2:  Personality Variables of Asian/American Characters Coded

Within the Duplicitous personality variable, characters were coded as Unknown (38.1%), N (38.1%), Y (23.7%). While cisgender men and women were nearly equally likely to be not-duplicitous (17 men, 20 women), cisgender women were more likely to be duplicitous (15 women to 9 men). It did not matter what billed or

narrative role a character had in determining their duplicity, but characters who were specified as immigrants were shown to be more duplicitous than not-duplicitous (5 out of 7 characters versus 2 out of 7).

In regards to level 5 (relationship) variables, a majority of characters were coded as "N" for a lack of any sexual or romantic behaviors or conversations. Out of the behaviors, Light Kissing/Touching was most commonly coded as "Y" (16.5%); out of conversations, Building/Maintaining a Relationship was most commonly coded as "Y" (21.6%). If we break these variables by gender, cisgender men are more commonly coded as "Y" than women in talk regarding Building/Maintaining a Relationship (13 versus 8), but cisgender women slightly more frequently than men mention Liking/Loving Someone (9 versus 7) and Words Insinuating Sex (9 versus 3). Within the behaviors category, cisgender women slightly more frequently than men exhibited traits coded in the following categories: Dating/Courting (5 versus 4), Light Kissing/Touching (9 versus 7), Physical Flirting (8 versus 5), Passionate Kissing (2 each), Intimate Touching (3 each), Implied Intercourse (2 versus 1). Cisgender women were coded as the initiator 8 times versus men's 4, and cisgender men were coded as the ones whose partners were the initiator for 6 times versus cisgender women's 5.

*Autoethnography*

As I watched each film, I remained cognizant of my own reactions. While the story in the introduction is the most extreme of my experiences coding for this study, it is by no means an outlier. A majority of the programs I watched (25 out of 30) only had a couple of scenes with an Asian/American character in them at all. For these programs, I could easily fast-forward through a majority of the program without needing to pause and code too often; showing that even if Asian/Americans are present, the characters do not have much of a presence. If they did, it felt very subservient towards the growth of the main (white) character. In one of the episodes of *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2019), for example, the Korean nail techs introduce Kimmy to white privilege. In *Love* (2016), the Asian/American characters serve as nuisances or downright adversarial coworkers to the protagonists. If the Asian/American characters are not subservient to the growth of the main character, they served as comedic gags. In *Girlboss* (2017) this was especially the case—all four Asian/American characters were written in this way. The nurse who greets Sophia when she arrives in the hospital for a medical emergency grins foolishly and proclaims, "Okay, I need to shave *down there*!" It is supposed to be absurd to the audience that this nurse knows about what lies *down there*, or that she is allowed to be near that area. One of the doctors who treat Sophia is made fun of for his eyebrows and is considered ugly compared to his white counterpart. Kaavi the web designer and Edwin the laundryman are emotionless robots who serve to propel Sophia to be the great online fashion mogul she is surely destined to become, reiterating scholarship that articulates how Asian/Americans can only tend the terrain of

American society and bolster its (white) inhabitants, but never partake themselves (Yoon, 2008).

The Asian/American characters that did not fall under either of the previous two categories were infused with stereotypes. While *Sense8* (2015) is filled with domineering albeit still emasculated husbands for their token Indian characters, and an oppressed daughter to serve as their token Korean character, *Daredevil* (2016) has a living, breathing dragon lady in Elektra Natchios[5]. One of two love interests for lead Matt Murdock, Elektra is a sharp contrast to blonde, demure Karen Page. While Karen and Matt only kiss at the end of their first date, Electra is a thrill seeker who is also extremely sexual. In the climax of their relationship, Electra tricks Matthew into breaking into the house of his father's killer, before encouraging Matthew to murder the man in question. "There was always this glorious darkness inside of you," Elektra tells Matthew with the guiltless smile of a sociopath. "That's why I loved you. That's why you loved me too. Don't deny what we have." She is the exotic East in one character, blowing off money without care and cajoling out a dark side to Matthew that would not have, apparently, come to light without her influence, reaffirming notions of Asian/American women throughout American history and culture (Shimizu, 2007; Marchetti, 1993). There is no mention of her past, her hopes, her dreams. I swore that I could feel my blood boil in my veins the more I watched.

The stereotypes woven into the character of Tam in *The Cloverfield Paradox* (2018) are not as obvious, but still just as jarring to witness. An engineer from China, Tam is the only character to speak solely in her native language of Mandarin. While there are German and Brazilian crew members on the space shuttle, neither of them speaks solely in German or Portuguese. The entire time she is on screen, she seems subservient to the needs of her German partner, Kiel, and doesn't seem to have many needs of her own. Despite an emergency of horrific proportions on the space shuttle, not much care is given towards how Tam is feeling about her circumstances. She is tasked with both fixing the problem and, somehow, despite being an engineer and not a doctor or a mortician, cutting open the body of a dead crew mate for horror film shenanigans. She is not even allowed to blink at the terrors she is put through, even when she is murdered: her last act is to tragically put her hand against the glass that separates her from the others to meet Kiel's. Tam is treated as an alien the most, though, when a white, blonde woman, Mina, from a parallel universe is dragged into the universe of the main cast. When she sees Tam, a truly disturbed and fearful look crosses her face. "I know everyone," Mina says, "everyone except *her*." In my seat, I felt slightly nauseous at the way the syllables of her words twist into disgust (Chu, 2015). "Who is that woman?" It turns out, in Mina's original universe, she has Tam's job. After Tam drowns, Mina takes her place,

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[5] It is important to note that *Daredevil* is based off a comic book series. Marvel Comics and comic books have had a long, questionable history with Asian/American representation. One of their most famous Asian/American heroes is Shang-Chi, the son of the infamous Fu Manchu, who ultimately turns against his own father. Comic book heroes tend to not change over time. Rather, they are rebooted and reintroduced to new audiences (Mayer, 2014).

implying that Tam is secondary to Mina, tending to her position at the expense of herself (Yoon, 2008).

Even in nearly all of the five programs that I did not have to fast-forward through, there seemed to be a catch with each of their representations. In *Dude* (2018), the character of Rebecca is given a white best friend to heavily support and a likely illegal relationship with her teacher. Her mother and father appear so briefly at the end of the film that they are not even credited in IMDb. Within the film *Rim of the World* (2019), the main female lead, Zhenzhen, does not speak a single line until a half hour passes. However, this does not mean that no jokes are made at her expense in the meantime. ("I love… JACKIE CHAN!" a counselor greets her after he calls her "China," not bothering to use her name in a moment that is supposed to be humorous. "Do you understand the words coming out of my mouth?") When Zhenzhen finally does speak, she alternates between saying lines that could be easily prefaced with "Confucius says" or taken straight from the lips of a stereotypical lotus blossom (Shimizu, 2007): "My whole life," she tells the lead (white) protagonist in a moment that is supposed to be romantic, "I have been searching for love. When I saw you on the bridge, I knew you were the one. If you feel the same way… kiss me now and we will be together forever." The actress who plays Zhenzhen is 13 years old, and I could not help but wonder if the same would be asked of a white actress.

The one exception I found in the entire sample was *Always Be My Maybe*. This film, hailed as an example of how Asian/American representation is rising over the past couple of years, is praised for a reason. *Always Be My Maybe* doesn't just have a cast of mostly Asian/American characters; it has a cast of well-rounded, complex, detail-rich Asian/American characters. All of them are treated with respect and empathy, and while there are comedic moments, the characters are not defined solely by these comedic moments. The film was filled with different relationships—not just familial ones or friendships, but also ones of a sexual and romantic nature. If a character gives advice, there is no mystic Confucius, but rather a person who has experienced life to its fullest and gained some wisdom in the process. Asian/American culture is imbued throughout the movie, and questions of race are dealt with, but in a fashion that feels like more like an aspect of a character's humanity than a plot device. I did not have to code "Unknown" for any of the characters once, as I gained enough information about all the variables to code for them; this was the only program in which this was the case.

## Discussion

Coming into this study, I had a vague sense of what I might find. Progress has always been like riding a bike: while it moves straight forward, its wheels move in a cyclical fashion. I am reminded of this through my second coder. My second coder was my mother. She and her family emigrated to America from Hong Kong in 1968. With more years under her belt, she has witnessed the kinds of horrific,

more obnoxiously yellow peril-esque representation that I have only read about. After we watched *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* (2016), another program in which the Asian/American character is just the white protagonist's friend who appears for a handful of minutes in the whole program, my mother said to me, "I like the Lane character. She's normal. Often Asian characters are portrayed as different, but she's just a regular person. And a friend." What I had seen as a living, breathing example of Yoon's (2008) theories on Asian/American women and affect, the embodiment of "tending the 'terrain of national culture,' an affective terrain that they can never fully inhabit" (p. 301), my mother had seen as instead something incredibly positive, given what representation she has witnessed in the past.

Our juxtaposition in sentiments is something not uncommon within immigrant families. As comedian Hasan Minhaj, who has risen to fame through his comedy special and television show on Netflix, puts it:

> My dad's from that generation like a lot of immigrants where he feels like if you come to this country, you pay this thing like the American dream tax: like you're going to endure some racism, and if it doesn't cost you your life, well hey, you lucked out. . . . I was born here, so I actually had the audacity of equality. (as cited in Yam, 2018)

While we did not always agree, my mother's impressions provided me with a more patient perspective. There *has* been progress made in Hollywood representations, and I tried to remember that. It just became more difficult to watch, the more and more and more programs I saw with underdeveloped or undermining Asian/American characters.

To see that most roles for Asian/American actors within the sample are guest ones, that almost half of the narrative roles for Asian/American characters are that of a tertiary protagonist, is not what stuck the most with me. To see that only a small fraction of the characters engaged in their own romantic or sexual relationships and that so many parts of the characters' personalities are unknown is not what stuck the most with me.

What stuck with me the most is the *numbers* that came with these discoveries. 55.7% of the roles of Asian/American actors within the sample are guest ones. 46.4% of the roles for Asian/American characters are tertiary protagonists. Even if the character was billed as part of the main cast (18.6%), only 4.1% of the whole sample were allowed to be protagonists of their story. Only 16.5% of the characters coded had mentioned liking or loving someone. A third of the characters were unnamed. The fact that many characters' personality traits were coded as "Unknown" was particularly disheartening. While these variables were not, statistically speaking, relevant, they were the variables I had *wanted* to be relevant the most. After all, within the word personality is the word *person*. The more we know about someone's personality, the more we know about who they

are. With a series of Unknowns strewn across my coding scheme, it was hard not to consider the characters within the random sample as plot devices more than people.

What personality markers managed to get coded provided provocative insights. For the sake of my analysis, and in light of the swing in public opinion of Asian/Americans from model minority to yellow peril in the era of Covid-19, I found myself focused most heavily on the "Duplicity" variable. What was most concerning is that five out of seven of the characters who were coded as immigrants (and therefore, unassimilated) were coded as duplicitous—heavily reminiscent of the anti-immigrant rhetoric in the early 1900s of the Yellow Peril coming to steal jobs from white Americans and infect them with horrible exotic drugs and diseases in a "uniform, robotic 'invasion' or 'flood'" (Mayer, 2014, p. 22); the kind of rhetoric that led to the Page Act and the Anti-Chinese Immigration Act being passed into law (Marchetti, 1993).

In addition to the programs that work specifically to have Asian/American protagonists and casts, this study also shows how important it is to focus on the shows and films that don't set out to specifically represent Asian/Americans. 23 out of 53 programs I drew did not even write in an Asian/American guest role. 25 out of 30 programs in the random sample (83.3%) consisted of representation so small that I could fast-forward through most of it—this is where we find all the underdeveloped and fleeting doctors, nurses, spa workers, and restaurant owners. Whether the casting directors and creative producers behind the programs realize it or not, their representations add up in the human psyche and collective cultural memory. While there will always be guest roles to be cast and tertiary protagonists needed in every story, as Pham and Ono (2008) articulate, it is critical that we be vigilant in how we go about telling these narratives.

With the numbers right in front of me, it is hard not to be reminded of Gerbner et al.'s (1986) cultivation theory. One of these programs by themselves may not seem very harmful. However, after watching thirty of these programs and seeing these depictions over and over again, I could not help but feel exhausted not only physically and mentally, but emotionally. As an Asian/American who does not want to be a villain or a nurse that appears in someone else's story for five seconds, for me to see *only* that almost all the time while watching this content on Netflix was draining and disheartening. The fact that I chose my sample randomly allowed me to see what was beyond the algorithms that define Netflix, and allowed me to consider Netflix's library as a whole, to see if representation has made as much progress as Netflix advertises, or if their algorithms were making it seem better than it actually was.

This study has been rather critical of Netflix, and there is potential to read this and take away the study as solely an aggressive callout of Netflix as a company and creative producer. While this study believes in accountability, I also want to state that it believes in what feminist scholars such as Loretta Ross (2019) define

as "calling in": "agreements between people who work together to consciously help each other expand their perspectives." The aim of the study is for growth going forward rather than a shunning. Netflix has so much potential, and we've already seen its power through films like *Always Be My Maybe*, television shows like *Never Have I Ever*, and other originals. In fact, for those who are interested in those kinds of representations, it may seem like a great deal more progress has already been made, because the algorithm is designed to pick the best of the best and obscure the whole picture (Benjamin, 2019). The study's purpose is to add to conversations surrounding representation going forward, especially as streaming competition intensifies with HBO Max, Peacock, and others.

What would Asian/American representation look like, in an ideal world? This is a question many people have asked me upon hearing what the topic for my study is. Would it have a "colorblind" approach, or would race take front and center? Would it be tragic or filled with happy endings? Are protagonists allowed to be morally gray? While this study has touched upon what doesn't work, it is important to articulate best practices going forward. In the end, I would argue that the best kind of representation is a varied one. Not every Asian/American is a doctor or an immigrant, and while those are important stories to tell, they should not be the only ones told. From my personal experiences, I can say that some days, my race isn't the most important thing about me; however, on some days, it very much is. My life doesn't have its own "Very Special Episodes" dedicated towards any race issues I may have, but race influences many aspects, such as food dishes, relationships, and holidays, just to name a few. But my life as an Asian/American is rich and full of joys as well as obstacles, and to be able to see that in films such as *Always Be My Maybe* brings a sense of validation and euphoria that is indescribable.

### *Limitations*

While this study breaks important ground in the existing literature, it is limited in scope because of its nature of being an undergraduate senior thesis conducted during Covid-19. Ideally, the sample size would be larger—Netflix's library of original programming contains more than 300 programs, which undoubtedly has more representation to analyze. There would also be more coders to analyze a larger sample, and a more foolproof method than picking names and faces off IMDb could have been determined. Above all, though, the biggest limit to this study was time. With more time there would be more time to code more shows and more time to determine what variables were most critical to the study, which ones weren't, and which new variables should be created to account for newfound patterns in the data.

### Conclusion

In an era defined by 9/11 and Covid-19, how we write and talk about Asian/Americans matters. How they are depicted in our screens matters, as they may be the only Asian/Americans some parts of America actually interact with (Ono & Pham, 2009). As I conclude this study, I cannot help but wonder: Would the term "China virus" have gained as much traction without this history of anti-Asian racism? Would that Asian/American woman in Brooklyn have fallen victim to an acid attack if her assailant had seen her as a person, and not a device of China in their evil takeover of Western civilization? It is too bold to say that media programs are panaceas for racism. However, to say it has no effect at all is also a misconception. With Netflix growing in cultural importance, it is key to keep an eye on the streaming platform as it expands its catalogue.

While there are many important think pieces and articles written on Asian/American representation, the quantitative and random nature of content analysis this study utilizes will hopefully provide activists, scholars, creatives, and businesspeople with a fresh perspective on the issue. Going forward, further studies should and can be conducted; there are many directions that this can go, whether it be simply a study with a larger sample, a study that focuses on representation behind the screen, a study that focuses more on variables of personality, violence, or interpersonal relationships for Asian/American characters. There are so many different steps that can be taken. As such, my hope is that this is not the end of the conversation, but only the beginning of more conversations to come.

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