

Linplexity: A Closer Look at How One Asian is a Representative for an Entire Race

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Abstract

Asians specifically in America, negotiate with the depictions of microaggressions rooted in racism in everyday life. According to Derald W. Sue et al. (2007), “racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily, verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory; or negative racial slights and insults towards people of color” (p. 271). Common microaggressions imposed on Asian Americans in the media are their portrayal as perpetual foreigners, “Yellow Perils,” or the model minority.

The image of Jeremy Lin as the “model minority,” low-keyed, passive athlete is seldom problematized and often encouraged by mainstream media. However, Asian scholars, sports commentators, filmmakers and journalists have noticed mainstream media unconsciously or uncritically directs microaggressions at Jeremy Lin through the model minority myth. Hence, the tension in these portrayals of Asians through Lin on an individual level as the model minority constitutes and extends the microaggression.

Using Critical Race Theory and “symbolic microaggressions,” my research will apply content and critical discourse analysis to provide a clearer picture of Lin to deconstruct Asian stereotypes, microaggressions, and colorblindness. I will be comparing and contrasting non-Asian media perceptions of Jeremy Lin with the *Linsanity* documentary (directed and produced by Asian Americans). Can Jeremy Lin’s portrayal in mainstream media as a model minority be oppressive and empowering at the same time? Finally, I will seek to address the larger impact of this work on Jeremy Lin in terms of how the media represents Asians both in United States and globally.

Keywords: Activism, Asian, Empowering, Microaggressions, Stereotypes

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Introduction

Hawai'i is the only state in the United States of America where the majority of the population is of minority decent. Instead of being racially dominated by Caucasian Americans, Hawai'i has more people of Asian ancestry. To add some context, the United States population is 78% Caucasian and 5% Asian. In Hawai'i 27% of the population is Caucasian and at least 37% of the state's population (this percentage does not include people who may have Asian ancestry and are of mixed heritage) is Asian (United States Census Bureau, 2014, p. 1). Because of these numbers, while I was growing up in Hawai'i, I experienced racial privilege being an Asian American. I was able to easily immerse myself in the variety of Asian cultures in terms of food, ceremonies, and visual representation through the media. More specifically, Asian Americans were present in the newspaper, magazines, and on the television. However, looking on a national level, I was confused as to why there was little to no representation for Asian Americans on mainstream television shows, movies, etc. On very rare occasions, I was excited to see some Asian Americans on the television screen or in movies. According to the executive director for Chinese for Affirmative Action Vincent Pan, my excitement over rare observations of Asian Americans in mainstream media can be called "Asian spotting."

Background of the Problem

My "Asian spotting" grew as I got older and became more passionate with the sporting world. However, there seemed to be a lack of representation for Asian American athletes. The sporting world mainly focused on a Black and White binary. In doing so, throughout my childhood years, I did not have many Asian American athletes who could be a role model for me.

I have been an avid National Basketball Association (NBA) fan since the 1999-2000 season following the Los Angeles Lakers. Since then, I have watched many great players and future Hall of Famers play basketball. These athletes include: Kobe Bryant, Allen Iverson, LeBron James, Shaquille O'Neal, and Yao Ming. The last person on the list might be of a surprise, as mainstream media has not traditionally associated Asian men with sports let alone Yao Ming, the 7 foot 6 inch center from China.

At the same time I was watching professional basketball, I started falling in love with the game and playing myself. Ming was a perfect idol for me as we played a similar style of basketball down in the post. He was talented and skillful on the court as well as a role model off the court. I was always extremely excited for the match-up between his Houston Rockets and the Los Angeles Lakers. I saw them play each other in person on Christmas Day during the 2003-2004 season. Ming performed just as advertised. Despite his accomplishments on the court, many people in the media used racialized adjectives to describe his physical appearance and demeanor (For example: Great Wall of China from ESPN). I thought the way mainstream media was describing Yao was because he was from China and not an Asian from America.

It was at this point in time, I felt as if I could not connect with Yao because he was foreign-born and had a different life experience from mine, since I was born in the United States.

However, during my “gap year” between undergraduate and graduate school, while I was back home in Hawai`i, something astounding happened; the story of Jeremy Lin was unfolding right before my eyes. It was at the peak of “Linsanity” when I knew I wanted to write my thesis in some capacity on the impact of Jeremy Lin in the NBA. “Linsanity” refers to the period where Jeremy Lin captured the world with his stellar basketball performance for the New York Knicks. It all started on February 4th 2012 when Lin got his first start of the season against the New Jersey Nets and ended on April 2nd 2012 when he was forced to get surgery on his left knee.

While watching the incredible performances by Lin during the twelve-game stretch before the All-Star Break, I noticed a variety of different reactions, which perceived Lin in “positive” and “negative” ways. Some of the positive reactions were about his incredible basketball ability, a spark for the Knicks, and positive puns surrounding Lin’s performances. Despite many positive reactions to Lin’s success, there was still racist mainstream media scrutiny comparable to when Yao was in the NBA. Initially, I thought the racist comments on Yao were because he was foreign-born. However, I did not know that the comments affected all Asians, even if they were born in America.

In this research paper, I will explore how Jeremy Lin is a representative for an entire race being the only Asian athlete (at the time of this paper) to currently be playing for an NBA team. I will compare and contrast a close reading of mainstream media with the *Linsanity* documentary created by Asian American filmmakers. From these sources, I will display how Jeremy Lin is representing an entire race.

Literature Review

In essence the literature review will focus on what Stuart Hall describes as cultural identity. Hall (1989) states:

[Cultural identity] is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being.’ It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power. (p. 255)

The impact of Jeremy Lin in the National Basketball Association is part of this cultural identity theory and will be explored throughout the literature review.

Impact of Media

Images are prevalent in our daily lives especially in the growing age of technology. It is because of the vast advancement of technology we view multiple depictions and images through of the television, computer, cell phone, tablets, blogs, etc. With the help of these devices, we can experience certain cultures without ever having to leave our homes. Scholar Douglas Kellner is states how the media contributes to shaping and influencing our morals and beliefs. The media images we see on a daily basis also holds our American society to a certain hierarchy; it is telling us what a

successful person looks like and visualizes these images through representation (Kellner, 2003, p. 9).

According to Hall (1997), “Representation connects meaning and language to culture...representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture” (p. 15). Here Hall is suggesting that we use words and images to understand and describe how we view the world.

As scholar Qin Zhang (2010) states, “People’s perceptions and judgments about Asian Americans are largely aligned with the media representations, and these stereotypes impact people’s intent to interact with Asians” (p. 20).

This is the premise of cultivation theory:

Cultivation theory focuses on heavy television viewers and how they perceive the real world based on common and repeated messages received through television in comparison with light television viewers. People living in a television world are more likely to apply images, values, and beliefs obtained from TV to the real world around them because of the amount of television they watch. (Tanner, 2011, pp. 17-18)

By using cultivation theory, many people have perceived notions and messages involving Asian Americans. Most of which are just stereotypes surrounding Asian Americans.

These stereotypes are what Derald W. Sue, Christina M. Capodilupo, Gina C. Torino, Jennifer M. Bucceri, Aisha M. B. Holder, Kevin L. Nadal, and Marta Esquilin call microaggressions. According to Sue et al (2007), “Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily, verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory; or negative racial slights and insults towards people of color” (p. 271). Ultimately, what people see throughout the media connote distinct messages, which judges people on a general level instead of looking at an individual person.

Asian American males have been portrayed as asexual, nerds, or the model minority. Based off these inferences, race is still a factor, with the United States being more racialized than any other place in the world. For the purposes of this study, race is defined as a grouping of people based on similar physical features, ethnic/cultural practices, and modern-day geographic ancestry.

Jeremy Lin is the first Chinese/Taiwanese American to play in the NBA. He is also the first full-blooded Asian American in the NBA since Wataru Misaka and physically looks Asian. There have been very few pieces of work written on Asian American men and sports. However, having Jeremy Lin breakthrough as a global superstar with the New York Knicks, Lin put an emphasis on the media to challenge what is stereotypical associated with Asian American males.

One way to counter these stereotypes is through critical race theory. Critical race theory acknowledges there is a racial hierarchy between White people and people of color. As Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000) states, the feature of critical race theory

“attempt[s] to inject the cultural viewpoints of people of color, derived from a common history of oppression, into their efforts to reconstruct a society crumbling under the burden of racial hegemony” (p. 265). The main claim critical race theory proposes is to allow people of color to speak for themselves and not having their voices be controlled by White supremacists (in this case mainstream media).

More specifically, scholar Lisa Lowe discusses a way to challenge the hegemonic dominant view of Asian Americans through heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity. Lowe discusses how Asian Americans are different (heterogeneity); they are not homogeneous and not all alike. Not all Asian Americans follow the model minority stereotype. Instead, they have their own formation of culture (hybridity); they are shaped by a hybrid of cultures with their specific Asian ethnic culture and the American culture. Finally, they contain multiple identities/intersectionalities determined by varying axes of power (multiplicity); they come from multiple identities from what ethnicity they are, what their religious beliefs are, what sports they participate in, etc. (Lowe, 2000, pp. 428-429).

The Racializing of Jeremy Lin throughout Mainstream Media

A major theme that emerged in the print media sports columns was Jeremy Lin as a model minority. A model minority is typically referred to an Asian American who is smart, hardworking, and never complaining. Jeremy Lin was the ultimate underdog to be an NBA player. After his senior year at Harvard, Lin entered the 2010 NBA draft. Draft night came and went with Jeremy Lin going undrafted. He ended up getting picked up and cut three different times before finding some job security with the Knicks. This is why so many people describe Jeremy Lin’s underdog story as a person who has perseverance, and is hardworking. This is the reason behind the whole model minority myth surrounding Jeremy Lin, but ultimately, he needed to show these qualities because of another stereotype stating Asian Americans do not participate in sports, therefore are not good at them (Franks, 2010, ix).

Once Lin began to play in the NBA, it definitely changed the culture of the league. Having an Asian American come to play and taking the league by storm especially during the Linsanity period amassed a lot of attention from his NBA opponents. In the print media analysis, eight articles discuss Jeremy Lin as a model minority. The articles describe Jeremy Lin’s hardworking ethic, his perseverance as an underdog, and his humble attitude. As journalist Kevin Cullen from *The Boston Globe* (2012) explains, “With an admirable work ethic, he made himself into the Ivy League’s best player. But the Ivies produce a lot more Nobel laureates in the academy than point guards in the NBA” (p. 1). Journalist Cullen describes Lin’s hardworking attitude, which helped him become the best player in the Ivy League and eventually got him an opportunity to play in the NBA. Journalist Nate Silver from *The New York Times* (2012) agrees with Cullen by stating, “[Lin] is a quick learner and wants to devote himself to patching the weak spots in his game” (p. 2). Despite, flaws in Jeremy Lin’s game, journalist Silver characterizes his positive work ethic by claiming Lin wants to work hard to eliminate his weaknesses.

In addition, Jeremy Lin is a model minority because of his perseverance as an underdog who never complained when outcomes were not favorable to him. Columnist Jason Gay from *The Wall Street Journal* (2012) indicates, “[Lin’s] a

classic underdog fable” (p. 2). Also, in an interview with Wataru Misaka [the first Asian American to play basketball in the NBA], George Vecsey from *The New York Times* (2012) reiterates, “Misaka says he roots for No. 17 [Jeremy Lin’s jersey number when he played for the Knicks], as a teammate of sorts, and also as an underdog” (p. 2). The two journalists illustrate Jeremy Lin as an underdog because of his journey to even play in an NBA game. Lin was the California high school player of the year, but did not receive a Division I scholarship offer. This was the reason why he went to Harvard. However, after earning his degree and entering the NBA draft as a senior, Lin was not drafted by any NBA team. After the draft, he was signed by the Dallas Mavericks to play for their NBA summer squad, but cut again. Next, Lin went through a tumultuous journey getting sent up and down the NBA Development League three times and cut by three different teams before he got his chance to shine for the New York Knicks.

Racialized Masculinity

Another major theme reoccurring from print media sources were the negative stereotypes (including racist remarks and connotations). There were three subthemes as negative stereotypes: stereotyping Jeremy Lin with “Oriental” food, references to “Chink,” and essentializing and assuming Asians are not good at basketball.

References to Food

In print media analysis, seven articles alluded to stereotyping Lin to certain food. Some of the articles discuss Jeremy Lin in terms of fortune cookies; one article noted somebody called Lin “sweet and sour pork,” and one article looked at a Ben and Jerry’s “Taste the Linsanity” marketing ploy. Journalists Bill Plaschke from *The Los Angeles Times* and Clarence Page from *The Philadelphia Tribune* discuss the use of the fortune cookie when representing Jeremy Lin. Plaschke (2012) states, “America should see the game video from the Knicks’ MSG network in which cameras focused on a homemade sign that showed Lin’s face above a fortune cookie with the words, ‘The Knicks Good Fortune’ (p. 1) and Page (2012) declared, “The MSG network, which broadcasts Knicks games, aired an image of Lin’s face over a broken fortune cookie with the words: ‘The Knicks Good Fortune’” (p. 1). Columnists Plaschke and Page are denoting a reference to Jeremy Lin and a fortune cookie where the fortune cookie is commonly associated with a Chinese meal. Journalist Page also (2012) asserted, “A spectator yelled ‘Sweet-and-sour pork!’ from the stands” at one of Lin’s games (p. 1). This is in reference to an Americanized Chinese dish. Finally, *The Boston Globe* reported a new Ben and Jerry’s frozen yogurt flavor at the Harvard Square location. *The Boston Globe* (2012) revealed:

The Ben & Jerry’s store in Harvard Square tried to pay a clever tribute to New York Knicks sensation Jeremy Lin by offering ‘Taste the Lin-Sanity,’ a new frozen yogurt flavor featuring swirls of lychee—a fruit sometimes used in Chinese cuisine—and crumbled fortune cookies. The gesture was well-meaning, but the result was awkward. (p.1)

As acclaimed by *The Boston Globe*, the new frozen yogurt wanted to celebrate the success of Jeremy Lin, but failed to see the racial stereotypical implications the Lin-

flavored yogurt would have by using lychee and fortune cookies as the main ingredients in “Taste the Lin-Sanity.”

“Chink”

A second subtheme retrieved from the data was the derogatory use of the word chink. This reference appeared in six of the articles. The term chink is a derogatory word referring to a Chinese person. Journalist Richard Sandomir from *The New York Times* summed up the three mainstream media blunders to chink the best. Sandomir (2012) proclaimed:

Three people in sports news media referred to Jeremy Lin with the phrase ‘chink in the armor.’ Two said it on the air, one wrote it online. Two worked for ESPN, one for Madison Square Garden...How could Max Bretos, an ESPN anchor, and Spero Dedes, the Knicks’ ESPN Radio play-by-play man, not edit themselves better as they spoke about Lin without connecting the slur to his background? Bretos got a 30-day suspension. Anthony Federico, an editor who used the phrase in a headline on ESPN’s mobile Website that was removed after 35 minutes Saturday morning, was fired. Whatever discipline was imposed on Dedes is not known. (p. 1)

It is definitely unfortunate for the word chink to be used especially through mainstream media sources when referring to Jeremy Lin. However, the disciplinary actions established by ESPN shows the company would not tolerate any sort of discrimination.

Asians not Good at Basketball

A third subtheme emanated from the data was the negative stereotype that Asians are not good at sports specifically with basketball. Six articles made some reference to the subtheme. As journalist Leonard Pitts Jr. from *The Saint Paul Pioneer Press* points out (2012), “When it comes to Asian guys, we expect that they will excel in engineering or chemistry. We emphatically do not expect them to break the defender’s ankles and take the rock to the rack with malice” (p. 1). Journalist Pitts was referring to Jeremy Lin being a target by everyone in the NBA because they did not want to get embarrassed by an Asian American who is presumed not to be good at basketball. Correspondingly, Leland Stein from *The Michigan Chronicle* (2012) reported, “We all have personal bias no matter how hard we try to ignore it. When a recruiter or scout watched Lin, they saw an Asian kid, not an athlete” (p. 1). Journalist Stein was alluding to Jeremy Lin being judged more for his racial background than his basketball ability. This was not new to Lin as he faced basketball obstacles from high school to college and then from college to the NBA.

Analysis of *Linsanity* Documentary

According to dictionary.com, a savior is “a person who saves, rescues, or delivers.” Using the trope or metaphor of savior, I developed a “3 point” analysis, which emerged from the documentary. The three themes are: Capitalism, Asian American Masculinity, and Christianity. These themes also align with Lowe’s theory of

Multiplicity looking at capitalism, patriarchy, and race relations in terms of a specific historical moment in “Linsanity.”

First, Jeremy Lin is a savior to the NBA, Knicks, and conclusively capitalism. In the lockout-shortened season, the Knicks had an abysmal 8-14 record before he first got minutes for the Knicks. He ended up playing against the Celtics in the next game, in a losing effort. Due to the hectic schedule, the Knicks were in the middle of their only back-to-back-to-back series. In the Boston game, Jeremy proved he could play, and head coach at the time, Mike D’Antoni gave him the start in the next game against the Nets. This was the beginning of “Linsanity.” Lin revitalized the team and the Knicks went on to make the playoffs despite Jeremy’s injury later in the season. As Jeremy became the savior for the Knicks, his fame and popularity grew. With this phenomenon, he was also a savior for Capitalism. According to Forbes Jeremy Lin increased the Knicks company market value \$139 million since February 10th 2012 to the end of the 2011-2012 NBA season (in about three month span). That is a 6% increase. Lin’s jersey ranked #2 in jerseys sold for the 2011-2012 season despite being almost at a two-month disadvantage. He was also the most popular jersey for February and March of 2012 (Ozanian, 2012, p.1).

Secondly, Jeremy Lin is a savior for Asian American men. Generally, Asian American men are depicted as either hypermasculine (associated with gangs and violence) or effeminate (model minority or asexual). In terms of the documentary, Jeremy was defined in terms of the latter. Some quotes from the documentary, which reinforced the stereotypes were: When he first walked into the Knicks locker room, someone asked, “I’m sorry, are you a trainer?” (Chen, Yang, Lu, & Leong, 2013). Others in mainstream media stated, “Nobody thought he could play,” “[He] doesn’t look the part,” and “ [He] didn’t fit the mold” (Chen, Yang, Lu, & Leong, 2013). Even one of Jeremy’s assistant coaches stated, “Basketball is not an Asian sport in America” (Chen, Yang, Lu, & Leong, 2013).

Despite these criticisms from the media and people surrounding Lin, he was determined to prove everyone wrong. This was also the intention of the producers and director. In terms of their intention to create the “Linsanity” documentary, director Evan Jackson Leong states:

There were a lot of things about him that I could really relate to; we were both Asian-American, both from the Bay Area, and we both played basketball a lot. We both tried for the NBA; I didn't make it, but he did. He represented something I never saw before and I thought he could really inspire the youth of today; 7 or 8-year-olds could have a role model, one of their own skin color, one of their own journey, one of their own community that they never had before. Maybe there will be another Jeremy Lin because they'll feel like, 'If he could do it, I could do it. (Diva, L. M., 2013, p. 7)

Ultimately, the intent by Evan Jackson Leong resonated with me. The documentary proved that Jeremy Lin could play basketball at the highest level, which showed an Asian American could compete in the NBA.

I want to give a disclaimer to my third point. I realize it is very complicated, but this is my opinion. The final attribute is Jeremy Lin is a savior for Christianity. Again, I

want to point out the definition of savior, who is a person who saves, rescues, or delivers. The documentary focused on Jeremy delivering a Christian message. Lin states how he only plays for God now, not anyone else (the media, family, friends, etc.). He places God as the most important, then family, and finally basketball (Chen, Yang, Lu, & Leong, 2013).

Again this is only speculation, but Lin shows how Asians can be associated with Christianity on a national level. Putting such a huge emphasis on Christianity, the documentary glossed-over Jeremy's race/ethnicity (de-racialized) because a lot of people only see him through a Christian lens. This is evident even within my own family as my Uncle and Auntie whom do not have particular interest in basketball, are excited to cheer and watch for Jeremy Lin because he comes from the same religious affiliation as theirs.

Even the documentary has Christian values with the "T" on the Linsanity cover symbolizes a cross. Even the summary on the back of the documentary states, "...It also tells the story of a young man's faith in God that sustains and guides him as he faces obstacles, oppositions, and setbacks" (Chen, Yang, Lu, & Leong, 2013).

Globalization of Jeremy Lin

Jeremy Lin has not only made an impact in the United States, but his rise to stardom also reached out to Asia. Lin is of Chinese and Taiwanese decent. In the print media analysis, six articles made a reference to the global impact of Jeremy Lin. Journalist James Eckardt (2012) from *The Nation* stated, "[Lin's] exploits have electrified fans across Asia and America" (p. 1). Correspondingly, Nate Silver (2012) from *The New York Times* noted, "Think of the marketing potential in China itself, which has been starved for an N.B.A. superstar since the gradual demise and eventual retirement of the former Houston Rockets star, Yao Ming" (p.1). Finally, Kevin Cullen (2012) from *The Boston Globe* wrote:

"But Lin is as much a cultural phenomenon as a sporting one. This economics major is having a major economic impact on basketball. After losing its biggest Asian star, Yao Ming, to retirement, and starting this season with a two-month lockout, the NBA can thank Lin for this overnight burst of domestic and international interest and excitement. He is the first American of Taiwanese decent to play in the NBA and there are viewing parties from Taipei to Hong Kong. Knicks jerseys with his name on the back have been shipped to more than 20 countries. (p. 1)

Also, the impact and celebrity status that Jeremy Lin has when he ventures back to the "motherland" is greatly influenced by him being a role model for future generations. Longtime coach, scout and executive Tony Ronzone goes onto add, "There are 300 million people regularly playing basketball in China alone; 200 million of them are guards" (Wilbon, 2012, p. 3). With so many children and people playing basketball in China, it is not surprising Jeremy Lin has become an international hero. As stated above, there are 200 million people playing basketball in China that play the guard position. This is the same position Jeremy Lin plays. A lot of people domestically and internationally have their dreams and ambition of playing at the highest level of basketball, which is arguably playing for an NBA franchise.

Conclusion

Writing and speaking from an Asian American Studies paradigm (anti-racist, anti-sexist, etc.), I have come to the conclusion that the savior theme, which emerged from the documentary (Knicks/Capitalism, Asian American Masculinity, and Christianity) is all under the umbrella of the larger theme of “White Male Supremacy.”

America’s society is deemed a capitalist economy because of the very few people who control large amounts of money. According to Luisa Kroll from *Forbes Magazine*, the majority of these billionaires are people of White decent. In fact the top five billionaires in America are White males (Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, Larry Ellison, Charles Koch, and David Koch) (Kroll, 2013, p. 1). Looking at masculinity as a social construct, all types of gender roles are based off a White male. Finally, America is deemed as a Christian society. Having a religious faith (or being atheist), which goes against Christianity is looked down upon.

In the end, it is easy to overlook the multiple identities associated with Jeremy Lin. Looking at the larger picture, it is noticeable that despite these multiple identities Lin seems to have, he is still shaped and represented by the White Man. The oversimplification of Lin’s identity and the fact that it is done through the White lens hurts Lin and Asian American culture. The material consequences of seeing Lin and Asian Americans through White lenses hurts Asian Americans because their depictions are generally stereotypical images. The fact that most of mainstream media is shown through a White lens does not only hurt Asian Americans, but other minorities too. This helps contribute to the subordination of minorities in the United States.

Conversely, Lin is able to disrupt these mainstream images by not only exceling at basketball, but through his faith, which goes against the traditionalist notions of religion and Asians. This disturbance helps give Lin and Asian Americans agency. The fact Lin challenges the metanarrative for Asian Americans also helps inspire other people like Lin to share their experiences and counter traditional views of Asian Americans. This is evident with the producers and director of *Linsanity*.

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