

Model Minority: Embarrassing Difference or Proud Identity?

Yue Pan, Université Paris1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, France

The Asian Conference on Media, Communication & Film 2020
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

For over a century, Asians have been represented as “the other” on the American screen, which is very different from “I”. Nowadays, as the immigration situation and mainstream ideology are changing in the US, Asians have gradually become the so-called “model minority” on the recent American screen. But what are the new images, compared to those old, cliché-ridden ones? This paper examines this question by analyzing Crazy rich Asians from three aspects: the portrait of “Asian body”, the visualization of the “model minority” idea, and the popular narrative techniques of using stereotypes. The author argues that traditional clichés about Asian American people adapt themselves to today’s global capitalization context. As a result, new narrative techniques are employed by directors and scriptwriters, new images are shaped in which old stereotypes are represented in a mild way. But the basic logic of Asianization has never been changed.

Keywords: Asian American Stereotypes, Model Minority, Global Capitalization

iafor

The International Academic Forum

www.iafor.org

Introduction

The “images of Asian Americans on the American screen” has been a conflict issue for over 120 years, literally as long as the history of film. Since 1897 when Thomas Edison made a short documentary named *Arrest in Chinatown*, Asian people have always been represented as “the other”, which means different from “I”, in the eyes of “I”. Their “otherness” is based on their “differences” in every respect. For all these years, this fact constantly provokes racial conflicts both on the screen and in society. A reshaping of images of Asian Americans has always been demanded. When it comes to our age, as the migration situation and the mainstream ideology are changing in the US, It is an opportune time to launch this reshaping. So it’s not surprising that on today’s screen, we see the visualization of the ‘Model Minority’ idea has become a vital issue. It’s a huge topic in a huge context, but today, we won’t go back to the XIXth century. We will mainly focus on one movie, *Crazy Rich Asians*. Because this movie allows us to observe all the key aspects of this important issue.

I guess all of us can recall the summer of 2018 when everybody was talking about this movie. Indeed, the movie has achieved extraordinary commercial success. It’s impressive that in the first week of the premiere, Asian Americans represent 40% of the total audience, whereas the percentage of the Asian American population is 5.8% in the US, according to 2017’s census data. What is even more surprising is that this movie has received plenty of good reviews from Asian American audiences. A typical one is the following:

...there was no obvious stereotyping . . . instead (it showed) the nuances of Asian women’s experiences across generations.¹

By examining the reviews through Rotten tomatoes, we can find that a large number of the audience hold positive reviews saying there are no or few “traditional clichés” in this movie. But this is indeed, very questionable. What do they mean by “no obvious stereotyping”?

We can break this question down into three parts:

- What are those obvious stereotypes that have been removed?
- Are they really absent? Or are they still there but in another form?
- If those old obvious stereotypes are completely absent, are there new ones created?

With these questions in mind, we are going to re-examine the movie from three aspects, which are :

- The portrait of “Asian body” in this movie ;
- The representation of the idea of “Model Minority” in this movie ;
- The narrative techniques of using stereotypes.

¹ Allyson Chiu, An All-Asian Cast and No Martial Arts: Why the “Crazy Rich Asians’ Movie Matters,” The Washington Post, April 26, 2018, URL:https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/04/26/an-all-asian-cast-and-no-martial-arts-why-the-crazy-rich-asians-movie-matters/?utm_term=.70f3584ec1db

Asian body

Needless to go back to the last century when the otherness of the Asian body has been shaped: Fu Manchu with his slanted eyes and long nails. Mr. Yunioshi with his bucktooth and a strong accent. Dragon lady with her fringe, peaked eyebrows, and sharp nails. We can easily find all typical characters given to the “Asian body” in more recent movies. As an example, Jackie Chan or Jet Li. Their small stature is always emphasized by comparing with their partners or opponents of other races. And they always look less mature than their female companions. There’s a clear teenagerness about them which is emphasized when they are with women. Scholars use the word “desexualization” of Asians to describe this process. As for Asian women, it’s the contrary, their bodies are always sexualized with exotic clothing. They are often portrayed as a combination of a little girl and a woman. Their sexiness is not visualized with the female curve, but with teenage girl's body and innocence of their faces.

Given this context, *Crazy Rich Asians* is truly different, we see the sculptured male body in the super handsome male lead, Nick Yang, as well as in other male roles. They are tall, muscular. Their bodies are presented as a part of the landscape of this movie. Of course, this is a love story movie, which means, not like an action movie, its main target audience is women. That’s why male bodies are represented in this way. But what we’re emphasizing here is the clear white gaze. Nick Yang is called “Asian bachelor”. This is a complete western point of view. Because no Asian would describe another Asian as an “Asian”. So when he is called “Asian bachelor”, he meets two criteria: wealthy enough and western enough, with his British accent, perfect suit, and British manners. Of course, the actor Henry Golding himself is British. But the casting of this actor is proper, for this corresponds perfectly to the general logic of this movie that I’ll prove in a little bit.

The white standard manifests itself violently in the female lead. Throughout the movie, Rachel Chu’s body is constantly judged by everybody. The first time is at her friend, Peik Lin’s house, Peik Lin’s father says: “She is a hottie... smart, beautiful. Not like those K-POP skanks with no brain, big eyes, and small backsides, she has an amazing backside. This is Gold Standard.” So we see that he praises her for her non-Asianness, for her body doesn’t meet the Korean standard. The second time is at Yangs’ house, Nick Yang’s grandmother says: “The shape of your nose is auspicious.” This is a typical Chinese comment. And grandmother presents a traditional Chinese point of view. At the same time, the camera focuses on Eleanor Yang’s disapproving face. The third time is before the wedding, Rachel asks her friends to help her dress up for the party. Her friends suggest her to make “eyebrow triage, root crimps, and eyelid tape... And they dress her with the plum Balenciaga, the peach Chloe, the Giambattista, all the Bottegas, and that Jason Wu with the deconstructed ruffles...” With the makeup and all these dazzling brands, they succeeded in making her body non-Asian enough in appearance, therefore, she finally got an admission ticket for this group of people.

After analyzing both male and female bodies in this movie, we see a general logic here, which is that: In this movie, all Asian bodies are judged by the white standard. And there is a pathway for Asian people to meet the white standard to some extent: consuming. For whiteness is purchasable. In other words, you can just buy whiteness by consuming certain brands, by speaking with a certain accent, which is also

purchasable, for Nick Yang got his accent by being educated in the British elite education system.

Images of “Model Minority”

This leads us to the next topic, images of “Model Minority”. For Rachel Chu and Nick Yang, this couple interprets perfectly the idea of Model Minority. They are well educated, they have good jobs and good incomes. We can’t say that’s completely stereotyping of Asians Americans, for this is, to some extent, a reflection of reality. Here’s the proportion of college graduates age 25 and older of different racial groups in the US:

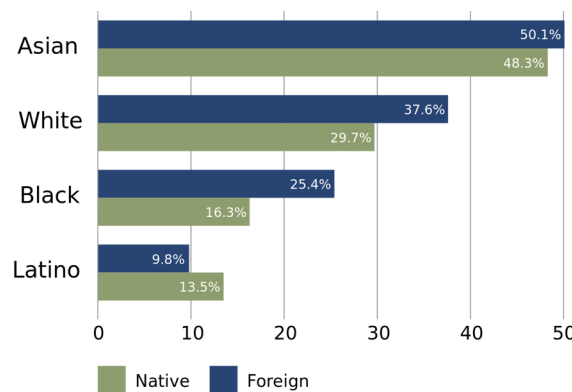


Figure1 : Proportion of college graduates age 25 and older of different racial groups in the US

Data Source: “US Census Bureau report on educational attainment in the United States”, 2003

And here’s the statistic showing the median household income of different racial groups:

Race and Ethnicity	Population	Median household income(US\$)
Asian Ameicans	18415198	87243
White Americans	236173020	65902
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific islander	626054	61911
Some other race	16253785	48983
American Indian and Alaska Native	2801587	44772
Black or African American	41617764	41511

Table1 : List of ethnic groups in the US by household income (without combination with other races)

Data Source: “American Community Survey 2018”, United States Census Bureau

In *Asian American Achievement Paradox*, Dr. Min Zhou and Dr. Jennifer Lee built a theoretical model. They found that compared to people in the sending country, most of the immigrants are positively selected in terms of the average level of education. But if we compare the proportion of college graduates of different immigrant groups with both the sending country and the host country, we can observe three categories. And many

Asian immigrant groups in the US, Chinese, Korean, Indian, Philipino belong to the “hyper selectivity” category, which means, in general, they have higher educational attainment than both their compatriots and native American people.

The question is how to explain this phenomenon. Of course from the social-cultural perspective, there are so many factors to take into consideration, including recent immigration policies of the US, the economic factors, cultural factors... But that’s not our topic of today. Here we are going to examine the explanation that the movie offers. How does the movie explain the success of the “Model Minority”?

The dramatic tension that leads the whole movie is the value conflict between Rachel Chu and Eleanor Yang. The movie keeps emphasizing Rachel’s Americanness. Rachel describes herself as a poor, immigrant nobody. Her mother said she was a “banana person” with yellow skin white heart. Eleanor commented on her, saying: “Pursuing one’s passion. How American. ” Rachel is almost a perfect example of the American meritocracy. You come to this land as nobody, and as long as you follow your passion and work hard, you get success. After defining what is American, the movie puts everything that is not American in another box, and then puts a Chinese label on this box. You have traditions, collectivism... in this box. And all these, in this movie, are incarnated by Eleanor Yang. She describes herself just as, not Rachel, not American. And the end of the story shows that the American value is the ultimate winner, and the Chinese value loses. Here, we suddenly found ourselves in an old narrative, which is that: in a world of duality, the East represents tradition, an ancient, immobile empire, collectivism’s oppression of the individual, the West represents exploration, the pursuit of dreams, of personal values. This is the big narrative that we’re all familiar with, it has appeared since the Enlightenment and has been developed in the 19th century. As Hegel’s critics on China in *Lectures on the philosophy of history*:

...they have no sense of development in their mind, but only a culture that stabilizes within its principle...²

This story has been constantly recounted for centuries, as an indispensable part of the self-establishment of Western Modernity. This big narrative adapts itself to the current context and popular media, but the basic logic has never changed. It generates so many prototypes of characters in our era. Take the example of Eleanor Yang, we can easily recognize her as a typical tiger mother. And tiger mother is one explanation of the success of the Asian Model Minority. Why Asian students are always good in school? Because they have their tiger mothers who push them. This explains this phenomenon reassuringly. Because these kids are considered as intelligent but without leadership and creativity. So they are happy to contribute to society under the leadership of white people.

From this perspective, we can consider the Model Minority narrative as an episode of that big narrative in our age of global capitalization. As long as we are still in this big narrative, Asians are forever “the other”. Their otherness may not be the clothing or the body, but their value. As we’ve mentioned, body otherness can be dissolved by

² G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the philosophy of history* (Lecture given by Hegel during the winter semester 1827-1828 in Berlin, included in French version *Leçon sur l’histoire de la philosophie*, Éditions Gallimard, 1954, p134 [our translation])

consuming. So we see the position of Asians in global capitalization has been confirmed: good labor and good consumer.

Narrative techniques of using stereotypes

Lastly, we are going to see the strategy used by new American movies and TV series to make this narrative seem less offensive.

Simply put, it's about exaggerating stereotypes, thus, the common stereotypes are deconstructed. This montage sequence is a good example. In 30 seconds, we see all the common stereotypes here, Kung Fu, Asian nepotism, the language, and Asian people look so unnatural in front of a camera. These clichés that we're already familiar with, here are fragmented and represented in the way of collage. Thus, these clichés are removed from their original context, their critical meanings are deconstructed but the comic effects are produced. Also, this kind of joke works only in one case, that is, only Asian people can use these stereotypes to make jokes. Because otherwise, it would be racism.

This strategy is so commonly used that we can observe it in almost any recent film and TV series where there is an Asian role. For instance, the tiger mother role in *Fresh off the boat* played by Constance Wu who likes to force her kids to go to Asian weekends school, she always justifies herself by saying: I'm an Asian mom. Also, Han in *2 broke girls* prints his name on his T-shirt. And when Jian Yang in *Silicon Valley* exaggeratedly plays the language barrier.

Also, we may think of Andrew Yang's "Math". In a word, this kind of humor can create comedy in movies, in series, and sometimes it can ease conflict in real life. And that explains why the audience's review was that there was no obvious stereotyping in the movie, actually there are plenty, as we proved, but as they are represented in a mild way, audiences don't feel their aggressiveness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in this movie, we see the possibility of turning embarrassing differences into identity capital, at least it can be a source of humor that makes your movie popular all over the world. But at the same time, we must not be too optimistic. Because this humor is based on the idea of Asianness, this idea, and any of its interpretation are all part of the white supremacy narrative. We didn't mention it because it's not our topic, but the discriminative images against dark-skinned Asians are so violent in *Crazy Rich Asians*. It is good to have a movie like this to make us laugh about things we used to avoid mentioning, but we must be vigilant when laughing, because we still have a long way to go to reach a real understanding of differences.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge everyone who supported and listened to me.

Thanks to Graham and Dominique for being my first readers. Thanks to Dr. Yi Chen for your sincere advice. Thanks to Anna for continuously listening to me. Thanks to

Michael for being my first audience. Thanks to Nuan for always giving me positive feedback.

Thank you all for your love and wisdom. You may not realize how important your support is to me.

References

Chiu Allyson, (April 26, 2018). An all-Asian cast and no martial arts : Why the 'Crazy Rich Asians' movie matters, *The Washington Post*

Hegel G.W.F.,(1954). *Leçon sur l'histoire de la philosophie*, Paris:Éditions Gallimard

Ho Karen, (August 15, 2018). Crazy Rich Asians is Going to Change Hollywood. It's About Time, *Time Magazine*

Kwan Kevin, (2014). *Crazy rich Asians*, Corvus, Open Market Edition

Lee Jennifer & Zhou Min, (2015) *Asian American Achievement Paradox*, New York:Russell Sage Foundation

Syginio Corinne Mitsuye,(Fall 2019). Multicultural Redemption: Crazy Rich Asians and the Politics of Representation, *Lateral- Journal of the cultural studies association*

United States Census Bureau, (2003). *US Census Bureau report on educational attainment in the United States*

United States Census Bureau, (2018). *American Community Survey*

Contact emai: Yue.Pan@etu.univ-paris1.f