

The Chinese American Daughter Figure in Contemporary American Films: Searching for Belongingness in Liminal Space

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Abstract

This paper examines the Chinese American daughter figure in contemporary American films through the concepts of “model minority” and “liminality”. Particularly, this paper focuses on the two recent independent films, *The Farewell* (2018) and *The Half of It* (2019), and their daughter characters, Billi Wang and Ellie Chu. The Chinese American daughter characters will be investigated through critical textual analysis. Drawing on the key concepts of “model minority” and “third space”/“liminal space”, the paper examines how the daughters are positioned and position themselves as 1.5-generation Chinese American women caught between the host country (America) and the motherland (China), especially, through the stereotype of successful and high-achieving racial minority. This paper aims to look into the dynamics of navigating a hyphenated identity and the “in-between” intercultural spaces as they are represented onscreen. As the films’ directors are Chinese American and the films are loosely based on their experiences as daughters of Chinese immigrant families, the findings of this research aim to explore and propose new perspectives on narratives that are told from the standpoint of both the invisible and hypervisible double minority, which can subvert and challenge white masculine dominant identity narratives.

Keywords: Chinese American, daughter figure, model minority, liminal space

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Introduction

Since the mid-2010s, social and political movements have created awareness of systemic racism and sexism, prompting the American film industry to become more accepting of racial and gender diversity and equity. In 2015, the hashtag #OscarSoWhite became popular across social media platforms after the Academy of Motion Picture Arts announced an all-white nominees list for the Oscar Awards ceremony, with no actor of colour being nominated and all the films featuring male-centric plots (Fritz, 2015). This viral hashtag, started by the social activist April Reign, emerged as a transformative movement that criticised the American film industry's systemic racism, homogeneity and lack of recognition of colour minorities. In 2017, the #MeToo movement, emerging from Tarana Burke's 2006 program, became a phenomenon that fought against sexual harassment and abuse, mostly of women. According to major American outlets such as *U.S. News*, *Forbes* and *The Washington Post*, the campaign has not only given visibility to sexual crimes and gender equality-related issues but empowered some survivors of sexual violence and assault, especially vulnerable women of colour (Corbett, 2023; Radu, 2017; Wang et al., 2020). In 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic fuelled an anti-Asian racism and discrimination wave in the United States that led to violence and hate crimes against Asian American communities (Kandil, 2020; Reny & Barreto, 2020; Wu, 2020). On 20 May 2021, the US Congress passed the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act to fight this escalated bigotry and hatred and raise awareness of, as well as condemn, xenophobia in America (COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act, 2021).

The emergence of movements that highlight and protest against the oppression of women of colour in white American society has coincided with a shift in both the quality and quantity of the cinematic representation of Asian women. As Li (2021) noted, recent American films contain fewer stereotypes of Asian women, such as the "Lotus Blossom" and the "Dragon Lady", and more Asian female characters on screen than in the past. With films such as *Crazy Rich Asians* (Chu, 2018), *The Farewell* (Wang, 2019), *Always Be My Maybe* (Khan, 2019), *The Half of It* (Wu, 2020) and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (Kwan & Scheinert, 2022), whose casts are Asian dominated and main characters are Asian women, the American film industry has reason to believe it is approaching inclusivity, at least in matters of race and gender.

Despite these "progressive" changes in American cinema, Asians generally, and Asian women specifically, still seem to live in an economy of narrative scarcity and desire for narrative plenitude. Narrative scarcity, defined by Nguyen (2016), is when a minority group and their experiences are distorted or absent in stories produced by the dominant group's mainstream culture. Narrative scarcity in media and literature, Nguyen (2016) emphasised, is when audiences of minorities cannot find characters that look like them because there are "[few] stories about them, at least ones that leave their enclaves" (p. 230). Narrative plenitude, on the other hand, is when audiences of an ethnic group can take it for granted that some parts of them are being shown to them in "a surfeit of stories" (Nguyen, 2016, p. 230). For minorities, narrative plenitude requires not only more characters of colour and fewer caricatures or stereotypes but representations that show and embrace their diverse experiences. Commenting on *Crazy Rich Asians* becoming a breakthrough for Asians and Asian Americans, Nguyen (2018) pointed out that the film indeed shows that America's perception of Asians has improved, departing from the old stereotypes, but then it raises the problem of being exceptional to be seen by white Americans. The story of wealthy and successful Asians was welcomed by American audiences, but what happens to the representation of "sane" and/or "poor" Asians, the ones who are not privileged, affluent and elite?

This focus on idealised Asian characters leaves the everyday experiences and struggles of Asian Americans largely invisible, foregrounding what is known as the model minority stereotype. The model minority stereotype suggests that Asians and Asian Americans “[achieve] enormous economic and academic success by working hard and following Asian cultural norms” (Lee et al., 2009, p. 69). In *Crazy Rich Asians*, this stereotype is embodied in the main characters, Rachel Chu, a respected New York University economics professor, and Nick Young, the sole heir to one of the wealthiest families in Singapore. This trope of successful Asians shapes the way non-Asians view Asians and Asian Americans while obscuring racial disparities and systemic barriers that persist within a predominantly white society like America. Moreover, the film title indicates “rich Asians” without specifically acknowledging the characters’ ethnic and class background. For instance, while Rachel Chu is a Chinese American woman growing up in a middle-class family in America, Nick Young is a Singaporean native from an elite, upper-class background who was educated in London and later moved to America. Under the model minority trope, these individual ethnic and class identities become subsumed under a singular category of “Asian”—one that is synonymous with success and achievement. While such portrayals may appear to move away from earlier dehumanising stereotypes, they ultimately reduce and essentialise the vast differences among Asian and Asian American communities to a homogenised racial identity defined primarily by affluence and exceptionalism.

Thus, to counter the model minority stereotype’s racial reductionism, this paper examines Asian women characters in contemporary American films when departing from discussions of pan-ethnic Asians and the generally defined term “Asian Americans”. This paper draws specifically on the representation of Chinese American women framed within domestic and familial narratives, providing a lens through which to expose the complex and diverse experiences of negotiating race, ethnicity, gender and class. The focus on the Chinese American identity, rather than the umbrella term “Asian American”, enables this study to foreground what Feng (1996) described as the fluidity and the continuous process of negotiating between cultures of the individual carrying a hyphenated identity. While the Asian American label emerged to replace the derogatory Oriental Other term and articulate a shared history of oppression, Feng argued that it fails to address the heterogeneity of Asian communities in America and risks defining individuals of Asian heritage as a monolithic group primarily in opposition to white Americans. The Chinese American label, instead of merely introducing the Asian themes into American forms, emphasises the process of “becoming” rather than “being” and “[preserves] a sense of contingency” (Feng, 1996, p. 192). The contingency of Chinese American identity emphasises the impossibility of Chinese Americans existing in a fixed space to fulfil a fixed role, thereby rejecting the racial reductionism that sustains the stereotype.

This paper examined the Chinese American daughter figures in two contemporary American films: *The Farewell* (Wang, 2019) and *The Half of It* (Wu, 2020). Through close textual analysis, I analysed the representations of the daughter characters—Billi Wang in *The Farewell* and Ellie Chu in *The Half of It*. This research explored how these daughters’ Chinese American identity is continuously negotiated within an “in-between” space and how such negotiations work to subvert, complicate or reframe the model minority stereotype. Specifically, I sought to answer two questions:

- How do the daughters see themselves as a model minority through the perspective of their Chinese family members and white Americans?
- How do the daughters’ double consciousnesses shape their self-perceptions and feelings of belongingness to America, to their Chinese roots, or to both at once?

To answer these questions, in addition to the model minority, I drew on the concepts of third space/liminal space and hybridity to unpack the contingency, fluidity and in-betweenness of Chinese American identity. The model minority stereotype functions as a success frame, defined by noble characteristics such as being hard-working, naturally intelligent, obedient, academically high-achieving, and economically prosperous. This success frame operates both externally—posing the conditions needed to assimilate into the white American society while obscuring the realities of systemic racism, sexism and class disparities—and internally, as expressions of filial piety and necessary strategies for Chinese immigrant families' survival in a racially stratified American society. When the daughter either conforms or fails to conform to this frame, it affects her double consciousness. On the one hand, when fitting into the frame, being a model minority means being closer to becoming a white American, yet still a perpetual foreigner. On the other hand, failing to fit into the narrowly defined success frame can lead to feelings of alienation from the Chinese identity, because she is the underachieving anomaly or the atypical Chinese. She may not only fail her parents' expectations and the filial duties of a good daughter, but also fail to proclaim her belongingness to the Chinese community.

Literature Review

Liminal Space: Negotiating the Chinese American Identity

The Farewell presents Billi Wang (Awkwafina), a Chinese American writer, who returns to China to visit her paternal grandmother, Nai Nai (Zhao Shu-zhen). Nai Nai is diagnosed with stage four lung cancer (but not informed of it), so Billi's parents, Lu Jian (Diana Lin) and Haiyan Wang (Tzi Ma), and their extended family arrange a rushed wedding in China to gather all the family members under the guise of celebration while secretly giving them a chance to bid farewell to Nai Nai. Returning to China, Billi expresses conflicted thoughts with her family members over their dishonesty towards Nai Nai. While Billi believes Nai Nai deserves to know about her terminal illness, her parents and the rest of the extended family refuse to disclose the cancer diagnosis for Nai Nai's own sake. This moral tension leads to Billi's journey of navigating the cultural antagonism between American individualism and Chinese collectivism.

The Half of It centres on Ellie Chu (Leah Lewis), a straight-A Chinese American teenager who lives with her widowed father, Edwind Chu (Collin Chou), in Squahamish, a fictional conservative and majority-white town. At school, she helps Paul Munsky (Daniel Diemer), a white jock classmate, write love letters to Aster Flores (Alexxis Lemire), on whom she secretly has a crush. At home, she helps her father, who still grieves the loss of his wife and struggles with linguistic and racial marginalisation in America. Torn between staying in Squahamish to care for her father and pursuing her dream of attending university in another state, Ellie faces the hard decision to prioritise either filial responsibility or her own dream.

Across the two films, Billi and Ellie embody the struggles of being a Chinese American daughter. Both the daughter characters, born in China but moving to America in their early years, are the 1.5-generation immigrants who are neither fully connected to their parents' homeland nor entirely at ease within American society. Together, their struggles reveal the challenges of carrying a hyphenated identity and navigating and negotiating their sense of belonging to America and/or their Chinese roots. Being members of Chinese immigrant families, they maintain cultural connections to their Chinese parents' heritage. However, their identities are not fixed solely within this sense of belonging. The metaphorical hyphen in their Chinese American identity marks an unfixed liminal position and a continuous negotiation

between the two worlds, producing the unstable sense of belonging of Chinese Americans as diasporic subjects.

The unstable sense of belonging of Chinese Americans as diasporic subjects is articulated through their hyphenated identity. This hyphenated identity represents both the connection and the gap between the “host” (American society) and “home” (their Chinese root). Their “home” and their “host” are separated, yet simultaneously connected by the hyphen. The hyphen, noted by Naficy (2001) when discussing exilic and diasporic cinema, can be understood as both resistance to the homogeneity and hegemony of American political power and subordination of hyphenated people to unhyphenated people. The hyphen “provides vertical links that emphasize descent relations” but, at the same time, suggests a divided mind, an irrevocably split identity, or a type of paralysis between two cultures or nations” (Naficy, 2001, p. 16). It can signal a claim of roots and refusal to be assimilated into the American melting pot, a monocultural ideology that suggests diverse cultures are “melted” together to form a single, homogeneous society. At the same time, it asserts the idea of being “equal but not quite”. In this sense, the hyphen works as a symbolic mark that identifies one as ethnic and as “not a full, ‘natural’, national subject” (Khoo, 2007, p. 123). Hyphenated people will never be wholly accepted and trusted as full citizens. Billi and Ellie’s hyphenated identities, then, suggest that they are still Chinese, the Other, who have always been considered different and separated from white Americans even if the bond between them and their roots is strong, weak, or broken. This Oriental Other can either resist assimilation into American culture or become Americanised and adopt American ideals, but will never be considered equally ethnic to either an unhyphenated American or an unhyphenated Chinese. This can perpetuate Otherness and induce a weak sense of belonging and inclusion.

Oscillating between the host country’s culture and their Chinese cultural roots, Chinese Americans’ diasporic status and hyphenated identity enable the emergence of a third space, a space of in-between. The concept of third space, according to Bhabha (1994), exceeds the binaries of insider/outsider, us/them, oppressed/oppressor, and dominant/marginalised cultures. It is a space, though it can be momentary, that allows the meeting and mingling of different cultures, where cultural amalgamation occurs and new cultures are created. Unlike assimilation, in which a minority group adapts and conforms to the dominant culture, amalgamation is the process of multiple cultures coming together without dominating or marginalising each other. Instead of a mixture of discrete cultural subjects, it results in the formation of a new culture and a hybrid identity out of differences (Shurmer-Smith & Hannam, 1994). Hall (1990), when discussing diasporic experiences, echoed this idea about cultures and hybridity by pointing out that the identities of diaspora communities are produced and reproduced through transformation and difference. Hybridity, in Bhabha’s (1994) words, is the third space that “puts together the traces of certain other meanings or discourses” and “gives rise to something different, something new and recognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (p. 215). Ang (2003) echoed this idea of hybridity:

It destabilises established cultural power relations between white and black, coloniser and colonised, centre and periphery, the ‘West’ and the ‘rest’, not through a mere inversion of these hierarchical dualisms, but by throwing into question these very binaries through a process of boundary-blurring transculturation. (p. 9)

By blurring the boundaries between the binaries, the concept of hybridity resists fixing meanings and representations of the Chinese American identity within any rigid or oppositional framework. This capacity for negotiation and reinterpretation is connected to the practice of

transcoding that complicates and reappropriates the model minority stereotype placed upon the daughter characters in my selected films, producing alternative meanings.

The Model Minority Stereotype

The concept of model minority, coined by Petersen (1996), refers to Asian American immigrants, mostly Japanese American and Chinese American, being recognised as socially, academically and economically successful owing to their hard work, intelligence and obedience despite omission and marginalisation by their host country, America. Thus, the term tacitly suggests that no or little assistance or action against oppression and discrimination is needed for minority groups as long as they are the “ideal immigrants” who have the requisite characteristics and the willingness to assimilate into American society (Ramirez, 2020; Wu, 2014). This overlooks the systemic and structural racism experienced by Asian Americans, ignores the diversity within Asian Americans themselves, and creates rivalry between Asian Americans and other communities of colour in America. The model minority myth continues to place white Americans at the top of the hierarchy while people of colour strive for “closeness to proximity” in a white supremacist system (Vinney, 2022). Rather than being authentically seen, Asian Americans, according to Wu (2014), are selectively used as tokens to affirm the possibility of the American dream’s meritocracy for minority groups. This model minority stereotype, with its tokenistic approach, not only disregards the vast richness of Asian American realities but also asserts that strong values of being a “good immigrant” and becoming successful are the solutions to American structural racism and inequality.

The model minority myth transforms “racist hate” into “racist love” while still considering Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners. As Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan (1972) argued, racist love coats white racism with acceptance. Carrying dual identity with the hyphen that makes them subordinate to white Americans, Asian Americans, as a minority group, “live in a state of euphemized self-contempt” (Chin & Chan, 1972, p. 67). Self-contempt is the minority subject’s perception of how they can never fully reach the white standard because they are not white. Thus, the minority myth appears as an “acceptance” for the minority subjects being included in the majority. Conforming to white acceptance by being a model minority, the minority subject accepts their low status in America created by white supremacist standards. Considering it an “acceptable” stereotype, according to Chin and Chan (1972), means accepting selling out and humiliation. Acceptance by white Americans does not equal inclusion; rather, it implies that Asian Americans are now the assimilable aliens whose social status depends on their ability, obedience, ethics and values, which are, to some extent, looked at from the Western view of Asianness. One example is the American perception of Asians, usually East Asians like Chinese, as law-abiding and disciplined people. White Americans believe the juvenile delinquency rate in Chinatown, compared to majority black areas, is low owing to Confucian Chinese culture that influences Chinese children to be more docile than kids from other racial groups. However, Chin and Chan (1972) asserted that a low juvenile delinquency rate among mid-century Chinese Americans was the result of American laws against the birth of Chinese children as part of the Chinese Exclusion Act (Chinese Exclusion Act, 1882); in other words, there were relatively few Chinese adolescents available to commit crimes. This example of Chinese American juvenile “decency” exposes the structural and systemic racial discrimination against Chinese Americans, which has been obscured by the model minority myth. The myth encapsulates a paradox: Chinese Americans are categorised as both assimilable aliens and perpetual foreigners. In other words, they are conditionally accepted yet never fully welcomed to claim belonging to America.

The notion of the model minority performs as a stereotype that signifies Chinese Americans' difference from dominant white Americans. The concept of stereotyping, which Stuart Hall (1997) described as a set of representational practices of the dominant culture when constructing the images of the Other according to race, ethnicity, and gender, focuses on three main points:

So the first point is—*stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes, and fixes 'difference'*. Secondly, *stereotyping deploys a strategy of 'splitting'*. It divides the normal acceptable from the abnormal and the unacceptable. It then *excludes or expels* everything which does not fit in, which is different. ... So, *another feature of stereotyping is its practices of 'closure' and exclusion*. ... Stereotyping, in other words, is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order. ... The third point is *that stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power*. (p. 258)

Regarding the connection between cultural identity and cinematic representation, this concept of stereotype has crucial implications for film studies, particularly when it comes to “character analysis” and “criticism of negative characterization of marginalized groups of society” (Prythor, 2016, p. 80). By tracing the traits of the model minority stereotype as it finds expression in the Chinese American daughter characters in *The Farewell* and *The Half of It*, this paper explores whether the Chinese American daughter characters are marginalised and their representations are used to maintain the social hierarchy of white Americans and communities of colour owing to Americans' exercise of symbolic power through representational practices.

Being subjected to the model minority stereotype, Chinese American daughters experience a form of double consciousness that complicates their sense of belonging. On the one hand, they cannot claim an unhyphenated American identity because they cannot physically escape their ethnoracial identity. On the other hand, they reject their Chinese identity when they fail to conform to the model minority vision of success. The model minority stereotype defines Chinese Americans using a success frame defined narrowly by a set of noble characteristics and achievements. As a result, Lee and Zhou (2015) noted, this creates a “self-selection process” in which those who fit into this success frame get to claim the Chinese part of their Chinese American identity and a sense of belonging to the Chinese American community. They are proud of their ethnic identity because “they saw their ‘ethnic values’ as the fulcrum of their model minority success” (Lee, 2006, p. 333). In contrast, those who fall short of the success frame, embarrassed by their failure, choose to dissociate themselves from other Chinese Americans because “they feel like underachieving anomalies who do not belong in the ethnic community” (Lee & Zhou, 2015, p. 151). Perceiving themselves as atypical Chinese, ethnic outliers and/or anomalies, they opt out of ethnoracial identity and identify themselves with the white Americans whose individuality and freedom they think are free from any pressure to be successful.

Method of Analysis

This study employed qualitative textual analytic methods. I analysed the films' formal elements (cinematography, editing, sound and mise-en-scène) and narrative elements. The film analysis focused on the films' plots, audio-visual elements, dialogue, character development, cultural context and any other aspects that highlight the Chinese American daughter characters, their identity and their struggles as women navigating between two cultures. The analysis of these film texts also employed Stuart Hall's (1997) practice of transcoding to examine how the model

minority stereotype is problematised and challenged or reinforced in the three films. The practice of transcoding involved taking the existing meaning of the stereotype, in this case, the model minority, and re-appropriating it for new meanings that reveal the complexity of the Chinese American identity and experience.

Findings and Discussion

In *The Farewell*, the depiction of Chinese immigrant families marked by generational conflicts and a dysfunctional (mother-daughter) relationship challenges the myth that the Chinese American daughter's model qualities, successes and achievements derive from a close-knit family structure grounded in Chinese cultural traditions that value hierarchy, obedience and filial piety.

In *The Farewell*, Billi is considered to be falling out of her mother's success frame. She lies to her parents about her financial struggles and her scholarship rejection. On the one hand, as pointed out previously, she lies to her family so she can carry her own burden and protect her American independence. On the other hand, she lies because she wants to avoid conflict with her parents deriving from failing to meet her mother's expectations. Sometimes, the pressure on Asian immigrant children to fit the success frame which, Lee and Zhou (2015) argued, "is so great that they lie about their accomplishments in order to 'save face'" (Lee & Zhou, 2015, p. 142). In the scene in which Billi's extended family have dinner at a restaurant, we can observe that Billi feels pressured and uncomfortable when her aunts ask whether she earns a lot of money in America and when her mother calls her "a losing stock". She says "Life is not all about money. Money can't buy everything" (Wang, 2019, 00:39:40), even though she is upset about her fellowship grant rejection and she struggles to pay her rent in New York. In saying so, she distances herself from the success frame upheld by her mother and aunts, who equate success primarily with getting a high-paid job and how much their children can earn in America. This success frame reflects a shared belief among Chinese parents, particularly mothers. These shared expectations intensify tensions between parents and children, while simultaneously internalising the model minority stereotype. This shared belief suggests that success can be achieved through a stable income, high-status and high-paid jobs, and upward mobility. To some extent, this success frame reinforces and perpetuates the model minority stereotype within the Chinese American community itself.

In narratives of generational and cultural divides within Chinese immigrant families, the parental pressures and communal expectations on the daughter to fit the success frame also lend credibility to the process of othering through double consciousness. When the daughter is expected to fit into the success frame, her double consciousness, the dual self-perception and internal conflict she experiences, not only distances her from her ethnic family but alienates her ethnic family from the dominant society with which she identifies. In other words, when the daughter fails to meet expectations of success, she perceives herself as an Other, an atypical and underachieving Chinese, to her Chinese family. Yet, simultaneously, by attributing her Chinese parents' strict authority and high expectations to the oppressive Chinese culture, she sees herself as one who belongs to the dominant white American society, casting her parents as the cultural Other. The intergenerational conflict narrative is rendered a reproduction of Orientalist binaries:

The notion of cultural conflict between immigrant and American-born generations—the enlightened, freedom-loving son or daughter struggling to escape the clutches of

backward, tyrannical parents—is one of the most powerful ‘movies’ ever created to serve hegemonic American ideology. (Wong, 1993, p. 41)

In *The Half of It*, while Ellie first appears to fit into the success frame, the film subverts the model minority stereotype by exposing the structural barriers that constrain Ellie and her father’s lives in a racially stratified American society. Ellie’s hard work, intelligence and academic achievements do not shield her from microaggressions and the racial slurs. Instead, they highlight her state of being trapped between invisibility and hypervisibility, being seen by white people but at the cost of being seen through the lens of racial othering.

At the beginning of the film, Ellie seems to embody the model minority stereotype. At school, Ellie is a straight-A student, shy, quiet, hard-working and self-reliant. Her teacher praises her high academic achievement. At home, she is a dutiful daughter who takes good care of her father, who is still grieving Ellie’s late mother, helps him with his job at the train station, and works as a ghostwriter to make extra money for her family. Reflecting the model minority myth of a stereotypical Asian kid, Ellie is not only smart but so good at playing the piano that she becomes the church pastor’s favourite accompanist. Yet, she still struggles with discrimination and oppression. This can be observed through what Motta (2018) described as the paradox of living between hypervisibility and invisibility. Ellie is invisible to almost everyone in Squahamish in the way that Asian characters have been portrayed in several American films: as an extra in a white protagonist’s story.

In the opening sequences of *The Half of It*, we might assume that Ellie is just another Asian sidekick because she appears nearly invisible. Ellie is introduced to us through macro shots that fragment her presence, showing only parts of her body—her feet, elbow and chin. When we finally get to see her face, it is just a reflection in the mirror in which all her daily duties are written in checkboxes. In another scene, while the wide shot clearly shows the congregation singing in the church, Ellie appears blurrily in the far corner playing the piano as if she is just existing on the periphery of others’ lives. At school, when Aster, one of the few people who see her, notices Ellie, the camera adopts Aster’s perspective and captures Ellie’s reflection in a mirror, which is once again blurred and indirect.

When Ellie becomes visible to others, it is not on her own terms, but through the lens of hypervisibility, a spotlight that exposes her to ridicule and othering. She is not recognised as a full, complex individual, but rather seen through the reductive stereotypes and caricatures imposed on her Chinese identity. Her schoolmates perceive her as the stereotypical socially awkward Asian nerd—distant, friendless and academically overachieving. Being a high academic achiever does not protect her from these prejudices—it only helps her earn extra money to pay the bills when she sells her ghostwritten essays to her classmates. Ironically, ghostwriting is the only way Ellie becomes visible to her schoolmates. In the music class, the connection between students is expressed through the ambient sounds of whispering and texting. Ellie, by contrast, sits in silence. The only messages she receives are payment notifications for her ghostwritten essays. Her presence in the classroom is acknowledged not through friendship but through the writing service she provides; this meagre visibility depends on her invisibility as a ghostwriter.

The cost of being visible for the model minorities, as Hong (2020) argued, is having the model minority qualifications that helped you in the past used against you. Becoming visible and assimilable does not mean acquiring or sharing power with white people; it means being absorbed by the whites’ power and being “stooges to a white ideology that exploited our

ancestors” (Hong, 2020, p. 34). Ellie is visible to white people owing to her being a smart and hard-working straight-A student. She is also good at the piano, which, according to Aster, makes her the deacon’s “favourite heathen” in Squahamish, an overwhelmingly white Christian town, because he cannot tolerate the mediocre accompanists even if they are saved by God. However, this kind of visibility does not mean she is seen as equal to white people. Ellie’s qualities confirm her model minority status, but they do not shield her from racism. She is still subject to racial slurs, such as “chugga chugga Chu Chu”, and microaggressions, such as when Paul’s mother refers to her as “Paul’s Chinese friend”, a label that reduces her identity to ethnicity alone.

Conclusion

The analysis of the daughter characters in *The Farewell* and *The Half of It* reveals a common thread of resistance against the model minority stereotype in contemporary American films. The films reject the stereotype’s reductive tendency to essentialise the complex and multifaceted identities and experiences of Chinese American women into the narrow Asian American success frame defined by noble attributes such as hard work, intelligence, obedience, academic excellence and economic prosperity. This research exposes the intricate and diverse experiences of negotiating race, ethnicity, gender and class.

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