

Speak Up: Breaking the “Silence” of Asian American Discrimination

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Amidst the controversy brought on by the “#OscarsSoWhite” campaign, race, once again returned as a point of contention in the United States. On February 28, 2016, Chris Rock took the spotlight as host of the 88th Academy Awards to address the lack of color, more specifically the lack of Blacks in the pool of nominees. His opening monologue stressed the consistency in the unequal proportion of minorities represented in the entertainment industry, stating, “It’s the 88th Academy Awards. It’s the 88th Academy Awards, which means this whole no black nominees thing has happened at least 71 other times. O.K?”¹ His speech set another perspective on the contentious matter of racial disparity in the industry and garnered awareness for diversity. Following his discourse, Chris Rock brought in three young children of Asian descent, dressed in suits and equipped with brief cases. He proceeded with, “Please welcome Ming Zhu, Bao Ling and David Moskowitz” as bankers from PricewaterhouseCoopers.²

Vast disappointment and disbelief erupted from audiences throughout the nation. A night that was meant to raise awareness for diversity in Hollywood, yet again, resulted in pigeonholing a minority group and purporting the stereotype of Asians for mere entertainment purposes. As reported by the Washington Post, Chris Rock responded to the backlash with the statement, “If anybody’s upset about that joke, just tweet about it on your phone that was also made by these kids.”³ This continuing tolerance of designating a minority group to mockery reminds modern society that the diversity issue is not just drawn between the clear-cut divide of two races. This event emphasizes that more than just one minority group, specifically Asians, in the nation is being suppressed in the entertainment industry and there is a definite dearth of impetuses to make the public aware. In a recent *Newsweek* report that compared racial representation in Oscar

nominations since 2000 among whites, blacks, Latinos, and Asians, Blacks consisted of 12.6%, while Hispanics made up 3%, and Asians consisted of only 1% of the minority representation.⁴ Amongst these statistics, it is evident that all minorities face discrimination in this industry. With the emergence of the campaign to tackle racial discrimination in this nation, however, the persistent underrepresentation and stereotyping of Asians in film and television reveals the hypocrisy in the crusade against racial prejudices. There is a current deficit in initiatives to promote Asian appreciation and combat the tolerance of Asian discrimination in the United States, which has expanded over time from the traditional workforce to the entertainment industry. In response to this deficiency, combined public and union effort must be taken to repair the underrepresentation and support Asian awareness in the country.

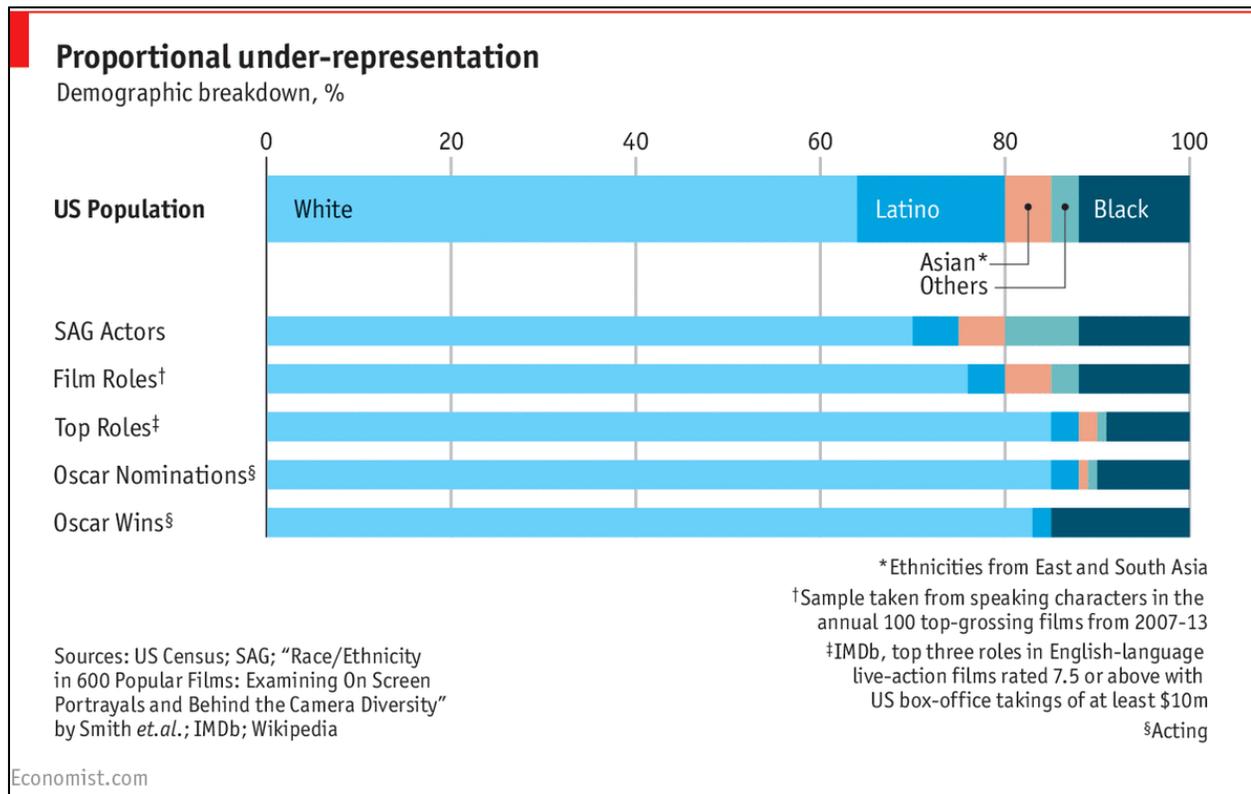


Figure 1. Proportional under-representation⁵

Origins of the Bigotry

It has been established in modern minds that historically, the predominant minority group, the African Americans has endured excessive oppression and discrimination in the United States. However, Asians have also been met with great seclusion and inequity in this country's past that have contributed to the progression of bigotry in today's media. The anti-Asian sentiments brought by the first wave of Asian immigration to the United States initiated the stigma against Asians in the entertainment industry. One of the first perceptions of Asians in the United States stemmed from the predominant Chinese railroad labor force connection to the Transcontinental Railroad. In the mid-nineteenth century, the first wave of immigration brought in a surge of Chinese male migrants lured by the wealthy tales of the California Gold Rush, with numbers of immigrants accumulating to an estimated 25,000 Chinese immigrants in 1851.⁶ Soon the migrants became highly sought after by railroad companies and others that were in need of an extensive and inexpensive labor force.⁷ With the surge of immigrants who also brought their families to this new country, the animosity from non-Asian citizens grew as they blamed the newcomers for the "unemployment and declining wages."⁸ Beyond that, people began slandering the Chinese enclaves in California and marking these residential areas as prime destinations "to visit prostitutes, smoke opium, and gamble."⁹ Eventually the government responded to the Asian aversion with the enactment of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which banned any Chinese person from entering the country, and those that currently resided in the States could not legally attain citizenship.¹⁰ Following this, the Japanese entered the U.S. to find work from 1886 to 1911, with over 400,000 emigrating to the West Coast and other U.S. territories.¹¹ The Japanese, similar to the Chinese, were initially working in low-paying menial jobs in "farms, mines...and railroads".¹² Once World War II was in full throttle, anti-Japanese sentiments erupted across the

nation. December 7, 1941 marked the day the Imperial Japanese Navy bombed Pearl Harbor and became the ignition for hostility towards Japanese Americans.¹³ Innocent citizens were accused of being “spies, saboteurs, and enemy agents,” and families were evacuated from their homes and sent to secluded internment camps.¹⁴

This initial wave of immigration painted East Asians specifically as outsiders and devious entities sabotaging and stealing opportunities from “true” Americans. This negative perception took flight with capitalization of “yellowface” and the Yellow Peril in media. In 1913, the notorious Fu Manchu was introduced to the literary world through British writer, Sax Rohmer’s novel series about a malicious, Chinese Dr. Fu Manchu who wreaked havoc on society.¹⁵ This character epitomized the fear of the yellow person and provided the foundation for other book and film portrayals of dubious Asian men such as Dr. No of the James Bond film franchise.¹⁶ The alienation of Asians in the United States augmented with stereotypical portrayals of the Far East. The entertainment industry fed on the existing hostility and purported people’s biased views in movies like *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* which included a Japanese character by the name of Mr. Yunioshi who was played by Mickey Rooney, a Caucasian actor.¹⁷ The film portrayal was an example of the many unfortunate whitewashed roles that produced offensive representations of Asians. In the rare instances where Asians were casted in films before the outbreak of World War II hysteria, they played supporting, inferior roles. Anna May Wong, “a third generation Chinese-American” was one of the earliest actresses of color on film.¹⁸ In one of her most prominent films, 1922’s *The Toll of the Sea*, she played Lotus Flower, a Chinese girl who falls in love with a white American who leaves her with child, only to marry a white woman.¹⁹ The film concludes with Lotus Flower giving her child to the American and drowning herself in the sea.²⁰ In other films such as *Thief of Baghdad*, she would take on the role of a villainous “Mongol

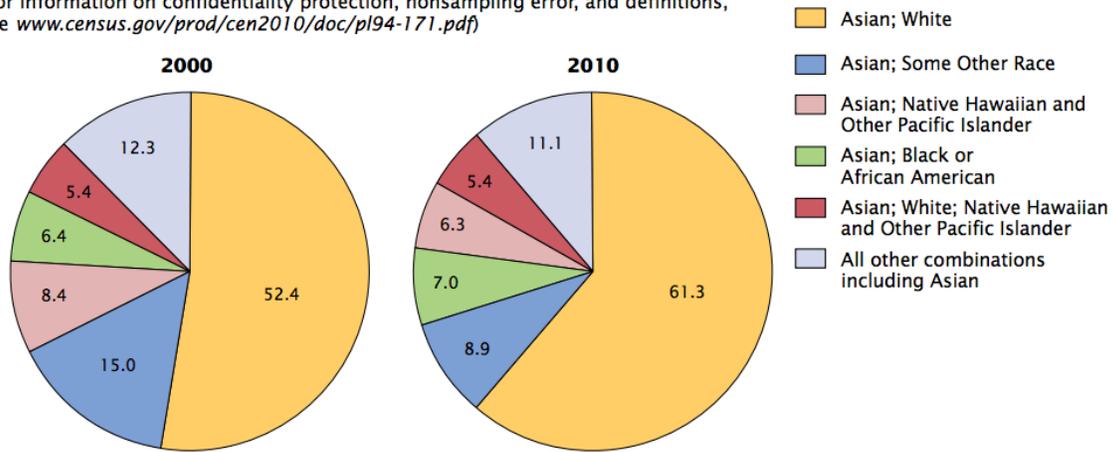
slave” and other stereotypical roles of wicked or submissive women.²¹ Beyond East Asian portrayals, the film industry classified the Arab community as the peculiar Orient inundated with caravans and barbaric sheiks.²² In the famous silent motion picture, *The Sheik*, an Italian actor, Rudolph Valentino was cast as the stereotypical “exotic and erotic” Arab sheik.²³ This film was another example of whitewashing that degraded Arab individuals from Western Asia. From the early integration of Asian culture into media, the libelous stereotypes and whitewashing have created an uninviting environment, indirectly fenced Asians out of the entertainment industry. The mementos of early twentieth century discrimination and racial miscasting continued to persist with the second wave of Asian immigration to the United States.

The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 transformed not only the demographic of the United States, but also the nation’s identification of Asians. From the 1950s to 1990s, the Asians went from 6% to 31% of the new migrant population.²⁴ The new surge of Asian migrants, were coming not only from the Eastern Asia as was seen in the past, but also from Southern Asia such as India, Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Philippines.²⁵ As of 2014, Western Asians from predominantly Iraq, Israel, and Lebanon make up over a million of migrants while South Central Asians from countries like Nepal, Pakistan, Iran and Bangladesh make up over three million migrants, approximately 8 and 28 percent respectively.²⁶ With the introduction of diversity amongst Asians in the country, “brownface” and a series of novel Asian stereotypes joined the collection of discrimination with long-standing “yellowface” strife and East Asian stereotypes in media and society. Instances include the controversial 2012 Pop Chips commercial, which featured a brown-faced Caucasian actor, Ashton Kutcher with an Indian accent, depicting an Indian Bollywood producer, named Raj.²⁷ This whitewashed advertisement infuriated many Indian Americans for its failed attempt at comedy by undermining another race.²⁸

Figure 2.

Percentage Distribution of the Asian in Combination Population: 2000 and 2010

(For information on confidentiality protection, nonsampling error, and definitions, see www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/doc/pl94-171.pdf)



Note: In Census 2000, an error in data processing resulted in an overstatement of the Two or More Races population by about 1 million people (about 15 percent) nationally, which almost entirely affected race combinations involving Some Other Race. Therefore, data users should assess observed changes in the Two or More Races population and race combinations involving Some Other Race between Census 2000 and the 2010 Census with caution. Changes in specific race combinations not involving Some Other Race, such as Asian **and** White or Asian **and** Black or African American, generally should be more comparable. Percentages may not add to 100.0 due to rounding.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, *Census 2000 Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171) Summary File*, Table PL1; and *2010 Census Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171) Summary File*, Table P1.

Figure 2. Percentage Distribution of the Asian in Combination Population²⁹

The Revamping of Asian Stereotypes

With the latest wave of Asian immigration to the United States of America, a new perception of Asians has emerged as the model minority group. Chris Rock’s disconcerting Oscars joke stemmed from the misconstrued classification of Asians as the model minorities in this country. The label was initially intended to commend Japanese Americans who overcame the discriminatory barriers faced during World War II to adjust and succeed in society.³⁰ This label has expanded its association to the general Asian race over the years, characterizing all Asians as “valuing hard work and education” to attain an “above-average socioeconomic status.”³¹ There are some cultural contributors towards the labeling, as 39% of Asian Americans feel that “Asian-American parents...put too much pressure on their children to do well in school.”³² However, media has had a stronger influence on the discrimination. Over a century of

progress, statistics have shown improvement in the quality of life of Asians in the United States. As indicated in the 2010 U.S. Census, 50% of Asians ages 25 and older have obtained “a bachelor’s degree or higher level of education” with 85% who had a high school diploma.”³³ The statistics, however, render a distorted image of all Asian financial stability in the country. According to 2010 U.S. Census findings, 12% of Asians still face poverty, while 18% still do not have health insurance.³⁴ Even within the Asian community, there are underrepresented groups such as the Hmong, Laotians, Cambodians, and Vietnamese who do not embody the highly educated, rich Asian American.³⁵ Reports from the Center for American Progress show that about 38% of Hmong Americans “have less than a high school degree.”³⁶ Isolating one minority with such praise in a vast multicultural nation has created an equivocal representation of Asians in the country and generated second-hand discouragement for other minorities and Asians themselves. The unrealistic expectations of Asians to automatically have attained higher education and occupations reveal the backhanded nature of the model minority trademark. Media depictions of the perceived Asian archetype only exacerbate the prejudices with such representations of Asians as the awkward, antisocial nerd. This can be commonly seen in today’s television programs with such characters as Raj Koothrappali, a “shy, nervous astrophysicist” of Indian descent from the CBS show, *The Big Bang Theory*.³⁷

Why is this continuing insensitivity detrimental towards societal progression?

According to 2013 U.S. Census estimates, currently over 19 million Asians live in the United States.³⁸ Even with such impressive numbers, there is still minimal and skewed representation of Asians in the modern entertainment industry. The overgeneralization of a race in the media does not solely stop at the bounds of cable or satellite television or at the end of the pages of a book. The burgeoning misrepresentation creates secondary and tertiary consequences

that obstruct the progression towards equal social representation in this country. To this day, Asians are still facing hate crimes in the United States. One of the most recent cases of 2016, Ivan Tsang, a USC student was vandalized with eggs and abused with “racist and homophobic slurs” allegedly by other USC students for being Asian.³⁹ This incident stresses the undetected discrimination of Asians in the nation. Furthermore, with stereotypes of weak, nerdy personalities associated with Asians in television, people may begin to see all Asians as an inferior race and easy bully target, which could instigate more hate crimes against Asians in the country. The perceptions of multiculturalism are manipulated when people’s qualifications for what they can accomplish are determined by clichéd racial stereotypes encouraged further by media portrayals. One may ask the question, “How much power does media have on shaping people’s views of different races?” In a study conducted in 1998 that surveyed African-American, Asian, Latino, and White children, when asked, “Do I see me in [television representations]?” 51% of Asian children reported “every now and then” as opposed to 71% of white children who reported seeing themselves “very often.”⁴⁰ The study also found that children from all the races mainly attributed “positive characteristics” to white characters while negative qualities were attributed to minority characters.⁴¹ These statistics strongly suggest the misrepresentation of people of color in television and the negative connotations associated with colored members of society. Aziz Ansari, a well-known Indian America comedian recounts the pride he felt when he saw an Indian character for the first time in the 1988 film, *Short Circuit 2*, which he later discovered was played by a Caucasian man in “brownface.”⁴² He felt angered and viewed the actor as “the bad guy...who mocked [his] ethnicity.”⁴³ As seen in Ansari’s case, the childhood deception and lack of correct racial representation in media later troubled him as an adult working in the industry.⁴⁴ If this country plans to progress to provide a safe and open

environment for all races and ethnic groups for future generations to come, there needs to be a change in inserting insensitive stereotypes to amuse audiences.

Possible Methods of Integrating Asian American Awareness

Labeling in this manner overshadows multiple Asian ethnic groups and skews the public perception of these citizens and residents in the United States. How can this generation find an effective means of deconstructing the model minority branding embedded in media and the public eye? Resolution begins with tackling the prominent sources that purport these stereotypes in film and encourage Asian Associations in organizations such as the Screen Actor's Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, SAG-AFTRA, and the Writers Guild of America to promote proportional and unbiased Asian roles in entertainment. Implementation of a national program which encourages racial equity in the public about inclusion of Asians in role casting, and screenwriting would help mediate the stereotypes and achieve adequate representation of Asians in the entertainment industry.

In today's society, there are organizations dedicated to bringing awareness towards Asian entertainers. Therefore, it is important to recognize that the Screen Actor's Guild is currently working with associations to fight for diversity in the industry, such as the National Ethnic Employment Opportunities Committee.⁴⁵ In 2011, the SAG National Ethnic Employment Opportunities Committee hosted *The New Asia America: Transforming Perceptions* event, which invited prominent Asian American actors and representatives in the industry to discuss what artists and others can do about the stereotyping and shortage of Asians on screen at the SAG national headquarters.⁴⁶

These discussions, geared towards the major unions such as the Screen Actors Guild, are crucial, but they need to expand their impact to the holistic society; they need to be taken from

the small platform of guild committee members to accessible platforms for the general public. While these prominent Asian figures in the entertainment industry are essential in building the awareness of the issue of racial miscasting and stereotyping, they alone cannot be the answer. Inviting the public in on debates held around universities and conventions and publicizing these through social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, TED Talks, and Twitter.

Another major element of this equalizing movement is implementing creative writing competitions or festivals for stories of people of color. The east and west divisions of the Writers Guild of America can sponsor such events to inspire the present and future generation of writers to incorporate multicultural pieces. Specifically, the Asian American Writers Committee, which was created to support Asian writers can encourage the younger generation of writers at the university level to share stories involving Asians and other people of color as prominent.⁴⁷ These big entertainment unions can also partner with current non-profit Asian empowerment organizations such as the Asian American Writers' Workshop, which is an organization promoting creative writing and journalism in Asian American communities through fellowships and writing workshops to aspiring diversity writers.⁴⁸ Through public cooperation, the prominent unions can generate a large platform to show large media corporations the need for proportional representation to help alleviate the imbalance in racial representation.

In merging the online community to the rest of the public, initiatives on broadcast television can be taken through public service announcements about promoting racial equality and denouncing modern "yellowface" and "brownface" in media. These public statements can be sponsored through the major non-profit, Ad Council organization and promoted through well-recognized Asian American figures in the entertainment industry and pop culture to reach the

larger American audience through the same platform that struggles to balance racial representation in programs.⁴⁹

Asian empowerment in current media platforms could also be applied to school curriculums or cultural awareness events for primary, secondary and college-level students. Introducing Asian diversity through schools can be achieved during Asian American Awareness month through activities that teach Asian cultural customs and cuisines. These events and educational strategies can be extended to any minority group, depending on local volunteers, student's families, and the school district, to promote a day of cultural awareness. The plan is to open the general public to different races and educate people at a young age that ethnicity and race are not barriers to what people can accomplish. Motivational speakers or community volunteers are encouraged to share their stories. Through localized promotions in education, students of any race can learn to understand another culture not through the privileged pity, but a nuanced educational exploration. While television programs may still present racial stereotypes misguiding children's perceptions of diversity, the cultural initiatives in school can be generated to clarify potential misconceptions of certain races portrayed in media.

With the emergence of the millennial generation, the new generation of Asian Americans needs to share their cultural experiences and express their hardships to develop a new view of the Asian. In order to stop the bias, there needs to be multiple initiatives coming from the voices of multigenerational Asians in the country to act as the bridge between the two cultures and to destigmatize Asian immigrant backgrounds and lifestyles. With an emerging generation of many second generation Asian Americans, the individuals themselves need to promote cultural awareness, not reject their multicultural backgrounds. Potential means of empowering Asians

and can come from social media outlets such as YouTube videos and events through student organizations.

Now, in the twenty-first century, society needs to disconnect their perception of Asians and Asian Americans from the outdated Fu Manchu and model minority jargon. When the media utilizes these invalid traits, not only does it discourage Asians, but other races by extension. This can affect anyone and failure to recognize this may stifle youth, regardless of race who may just give up trying because they compare themselves to standards presented in media. Discouraging stereotypes and underrepresentation in the industry begins with recognition that while the issues reside in the lack of opportunities derived in screenplay writings and acting roles, public awareness and Asian empowerment in social media are keys to fixing this unjust tolerance. Participation of prominent organizations such as the Screen Actors Guild and the Writers Guild of America in public promotion is encouraged to endorse proportional Asian representation. Through the accumulation of public awareness of the issue, the platform to promote greater Asian American representation in the entertainment industry may start to grow. This proposal calls for integration of major entertainment labor unions with non-profit organizations and promotion of Asian American heritage stories through the education system and social media. These are possible solutions to combat the acceptance of stereotypical representations of Asians and support the diversity effort in the entertainment industry. These are not the only solutions, but they provide a viable place to begin resisting the discriminating, stereotypical representations.

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