No more long duk dong: hollywood's use of asian stereotypes

Business

We have all laughed at characters like Long Duk Dong in Sixteen Candles, Han Lee in 2 Broke Girls, and the many times Family Guy makes a joke about Asian people. Many films like Rising Sun and Red Dawn portray characters fighting against the inevitable Asian antagonists. The main purpose of films and television is to entertain its audience.

However, it seems like Hollywood can never escape its system of recycling stereotypes, in particular, Asian stereotypes. When these exaggerated and inaccurate ideas are constantly blasted in media, they implant false assumptions about the people being made fun of. This results in misrepresentation and degradation of a group of people. The complicated issue with Hollywood Asian stereotypes is that there are various types of them, but in the end they all generalize every Asian ethnic group together. Scholars Charles Taylor and Barbara Stern argue in their article that " when a minority is not depicted, its capacity to assimilate with the host culture is diminished, for group members feel they are socially invisible" (Taylor & Stern 4). Therefore, stereotypes in Hollywood go beyond just media; they affect people socially.

So why is it that Hollywood, an industry that is responsible for storytelling, has such a difficult time abandoning Asian stereotypes? These stereotypes were built on the basis of the institutional racism against Asians that was first instilled during the Chinese immigration in the 1800's, and as media evolved over time, constant exposure to these stereotypes created a shared reality that all Asians adhere to the stereotypes being portrayed about them. Understanding the prominent Asian stereotypes in Hollywood and how they socially affect those being portrayed by them will help one see how they

have become so normalized in today’s culture, and what can be done in the future to counteract these stereotypes to create a truer representation of Asians. To understand what the issue with Hollywood’s overuse of Asian stereotypes is, one must first understand what these stereotypes are and how they are socially detrimental to the group of people being portrayed by them. Perhaps the most prominent Asian stereotype is the “ model minority” myth. This idea states that all Asians are socioeconomically successful, excel in academics, and work in high paying careers. This generalization is harmful because to those Asian ethnic groups that don’t live up to the model minority standards, they are ostracized and simply looked over.

In terms of other minorities outside of the Asian race, the model minority is used as a way to degrade their status. As stated by scholar Yuko Kawai, “ The model minority stereotype is constitutive of colorblind ideology in the sense that Asian Americans’ ‘ success’ is used to deny the existence of institutional racism and to ‘ prove’ that U. S. society is reasonably fair and open for racial minority groups to move up the social ladder” (Kawai 6). It is safe to say that the model minority is a way for the United States to claim that they grant freedom to all people of color, and if anyone denies that idea they should look at the Asian race, a perfect example of how minorities can thrive in our country.

The danger with this is that it does not hold any truth. When the Chinese immigrated to the United States, they had a choice to immigrate. Africans, however, were forced out of their will to come to the United States to work as slaves. Over time, the backlash and racism they faced only worsened.

Examples of the model minority stereotype can often be seen on the cartoon sitcom, Family Guy.

In an episode, Peter Griffin is taking a math test. All the other students take out a calculator, while Peter takes an Asian child out of his backpack. This reinforces the model minority belief that all Asians excel in academics and is dangerous because Family Guy is a popular comedy among today's youth. Other prominent Asian stereotypes in Hollywood include the Yellow Peril, Dragon Lady and Lotus Blossom. The Yellow Peril is the longest standing Asian stereotype and can be traced back to the medieval threat of Genghis Khan and Mongolian invasion of Europe.

This stereotype exhibits both the west's xenophobia and fear of yellow hegemony. Kawai argues, " the yellow peril signified the fear of Asian migration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and was perceived as a great threat to American identity as the country of the White race" (4). Hollywood examples of this stereotype include Red Dawn (2012) and The Insidious Dr. Fu Man Chu (2007), both of which depict an Asian ethnic group as the antagonists trying to invade the west. Both the Dragon Lady and Lotus Blossom stereotypes shed light on the the sensual and conniving traits of Asian women, and can be seen in projects like Kill Bill (2003) and the 2014Netflixseries, Marco Polo.

Stereotypes exist because they help us make sense of the world, and according to Kawai, they are " pre-existing categories in culture that maintain sharp boundary definitions, to define clearly where the pale ends and thus who is clearly within and who clearly beyond it" (10). Kawai also

adds that they are “ problematic because they tend to occur where there are gross inequalities of power” (10). Inequality of power is an underlying current of stereotypes because it is those who are at the top that are laughing and looking down on the inferior. When there is a stereotype about a certain group of people, it is basically stating that they are of less importance and rank lower on the societal hierarchy. Asian stereotypes have always been apparent in American media and popular culture, butthe notion that it was acceptable to use these stereotypes in media was first instilled during the Chinese immigration to California in the 1800’s. The Gold Rush in 1849 and the building of the Transcontinental Railway triggered a massive Chinese immigration because there were many job opportunities.

These job opportunities, however, came with an expense. The Chinese were viewed by Americans as cheap laborers, and because of that more jobs were taken away from white workers and given to the Chinese to reduce employment costs. As Christopher Shepard states, the hiring of Chinese workers “ inevitably led to hostility between the races on the issue of employment and compensation” (51). This hostility led to anti-Chinese rallies and the creation derogatory terms, such as “ coolie” and “ chink”. In addition to this tension, the Chinese refused to assimilate to American culture and continued practicing their cultural customs.

When these customs did not align with the Christian American values, the white citizens began ostracizing this new racial group. Newspapers began printing out anti-Chinese headlines, claiming that this was an “ invasion” and that the Chinese had to go. Congressman Aaron Sargent, who was vocal

about his disdain for the Chinese immigrants, was at the forefront of stopping Chinese immigration.” Sargent believed that they were not worthy of being called Americans. He did present in this speech why he supported the naturalization of immigrants from other countries, especially from Europe – because they were of similar ethnicity, religious background, and political thinking” (Shepard 52). As the xenophobia escalated, so did the newspaper portrayals of the Chinese.

Racist illustrations depicting the Chinese as “ barbaric” and “ foreign” heavily influenced the country’s view of the Asian race because at that time, newspapers were the main media source. The combination of Sargent’s belief that the Chinese should not be considered citizens based on the color of their skin and the newspapers reinforced the idea that the Chinese were aliens and not part of the American society. The newspapers played an integral role in shaping the American view of Asians, and as media outlets evolved over time with technology, it would become difficult to denounce the stereotypical images that have been plastered into our culture. It is apparent that we as humans are heavily influenced by what we see in the media. Whether it’s an outfit in a clothing magazine, a product on TV, or a story in a newspaper, our thinking and ideas are driven by these exposures.

Scholars Melody Manchi Chao, Chi-yue Chiu, Wayne Chan, Rodolfo Mendoze-Denton, and Carolyn Kwok would agree when they argue in favor that “ repeated exposure to the same idea would increase the perceived sharedness of the idea in the community” (85). Furthermore, “ recent research has shown that when individuals are repeatedly exposed to the

same persuasive argument many times, even when the perceivers receive many repetitions of the argument from the same source, they tend to believe that the argument is widely shared among others.” What these scholars are essentially trying to say is that constant exposure to the same idea will make us believe that others share the same idea as well. When the newspapers began printing out anti-Chinese headlines accompanied by racist illustrations in the 1800’s, this served as the springboard for future stereotypical portrayals of Asians in the media. Once television and films were developed, this constant portrayal of the Asian race would make its perceivers believe that this was the way Asians really were.

This is what is called a shared reality, the belief that the idea is shared among others. Once the shared reality is formed, it is difficult to dissolve. Today’s newspapers no longer use the language and racism that those in the 1800’s did, so why is it that we have not gone back on the stereotypes? Well, although the language is no longer in use, the stereotypes are still very prominent because today’s culture has been taught that verbal and written racism is wrong. However, stereotypes are ideas, therefore making it more difficult to get rid of. In order for a stereotype to be given power, a binary relationship must first be established. This non-neutral relationship distinguishes between two categories: good versus bad.

There is always an implication of power, for example, “ civilized” versus “ barbaric”, “ white” versus “ non-white”, and “ us” versus “ them”. The role that the newspapers played during the first wave of Chinese immigration in the 1800’s was crucial because they were essentially the ones who gave

birth to the “ white” versus “ Chinese” binary relationship, which would eventually change from just Chinese to the entire Asian race. Binary relationships, according to author Hemant Shah, “ gloss over a wide range of subtle and not-so-subtle distinctions existing between the poles” (Shah 2). By oversimplifying an entire group of people, the binary fails to represent the differences within that group, and therefore falls into the trap of stereotyping. The newspaper illustrations depicting the Chinese immigrants with slits as eyes and comical buck teeth painted them as foreign and barbaric creatures.

Thus, the white American audience who viewed these images would establish a negative connotation whenever they associated these abnormal features with a Chinese person. Shah further explains in his article, “ mass media, as important sites for the production and distribution of cultural symbols, can be understood as central not only to the policing of symbolic boundaries of difference between, for instance, acceptable and unacceptable people and human characteristics, but also as complicit policies to segregate and degrade those deemed different” (4). As a result, the newspapers were used as weapons against the Chinese in order to further degrade their status. Over time as films and television joined the media circuit and other Asian ethnicities immigrated to the country, the continual of stereotypical portrayals would clump all Asian ethnicities together, transitioning the “ white” versus “ Chinese” binary to “ white” versus “ Asian”. Furthermore, an additional result of this binary includes binding Asians to a connotation that implies they are part of the “ other” category, ostracizing them from the rest of the American society. Examples of this in Hollywood include Long Duk

Dong from John Hughes’s 1984 film, Sixteen Candles, as well as Han Lee in the sitcom, 2 Broke Girls.

Both of these characters exhibit the stereotypical Asian features and speak in a heavy accent. These traits portray them as “ others” and signifies that they are foreign beings who do not belong in American society. Long Duk Dong has become the poster child of Asian stereotypes in Hollywood every since the premiere of the film. A foreign-exchange student, Dong is awkward around girls, makes a joke of himself every time he tries to assimilate into American culture, and is the main source of comic relief in the film. Martin Wong, co-founder of the Asian-American pop culture magazine Giant Robot, shares, “ If you’re being called Long Duk Dong, you’re comic relief amongst a sea of people unlike you” (MacAdam). To teenagers of the 1980’s, that decade can be summed up as the “ John Hughes era”.

Hughes’s popular teenage films shaped the thinking of many young viewers. Susanna Gora, author of the book You Couldn’t Ignore Me If You Tried: The Brat Pack, John Hughes, and Their Impact on a Generation, writes, “ These films really affected how we think about the world, love, friendship, you name it” (McKay). Because Hughes’s films were so popular among young people, his creation of Dong’s character set the notion that it was still acceptable to laugh and ostracize those who were deemed different than you. Furthermore, Dong only reinforced the idea that Asians are outsiders. Although Sixteen Candles came about over thirty years ago, the generation exposed to his character are now adults with their own children, and those children are rediscovering the films of John Hughes.

This could explain why Dong’s character is still so widely talked about today, and no matter how hard people try to kill the Asian stereotypes, he still pops his head down from the top bunk of the bed. It is safe to say that Han Lee, the Korean-American diner owner in 2 Broke Girls, can be called the birth child of Long Duk Dong. Lee’s character is one of the latest victims of Hollywood’s racism and ignorance towards the use of Asian stereotypes. His character is portrayed as sexually awkward, effeminate, and is ridiculed for his broken English. Tim Goodman of The Hollywood Reporter states, “ Never mind that there’s already been a joke about him being Asian, or that one joke had him changing his name toe Bryce Lee so that the writers could get that Bruce Lee joke in… each week Han’s broken English gets played like some sorry minstrel show” (Goodman).

It seems as if Lee’s only real purpose on the show is to get made fun of for being Asian, which is bound to receive laughs from the show’s live audience. Premiering in 2011, one would think that the writers of 2 Broke Girls would be intelligent and educated enough to know that using one’s race as the source for comic relief is risky territory. However, the majority of the blame is not on the writers but on the ignorance that has been created in Hollywood involving Asian stereotypes. John Hughes’s creation of Long Duk Dong can be blamed for Lee’s character because Dong is still very prominent in popular culture today, and it can be said that he was introduced to the writers of 2 Broke Girls when they were still in their youth, thus influencing their thinking today. Both Dong and Lee’s characters display a binary relationship, which sets the two of them apart from the American society in which they are set in.

The “ white” versus “ Asian” binary relationship has been so deeply intertwined in Hollywood that as other minorities are being accurately portrayed in media, Asians are still making minimal progress. American television shows such as HBO’s The Looking and Girls, as well as networks like BET, all tell the stories of other generally underrepresented groups through their own perspectives. These shows and networks do not rely on stereotypes in exchange for positive reception. The first mainstream Hollywood project to defy the binary and attempt to tell the Asian experience, more specifically the Korean experience, through its own lens was comedienne Margaret Cho’s television sitcom, All-American Girl. Premiering in 1994, the show received negative reviews and was cancelled after less than two seasons on air.

Was this proof that Asian projects had no place in Hollywood? Quite the opposite, actually. There were many factors that went into the cancellation of Cho’s sitcom. The first being its intent to go against the already established binary relationship. All-American Girl portrayed a Korean family in a very American lifestyle. Hemant Shah described the show’s Korean family as “ an assimilated, well-adjusted family, experiencing the same problems and dealing with the same issues as any other American family” (Shah 7).

The way the show was formatted was a disservice to itself because it was always about Cho’s character, Margaret Kim, being ashamed of her culture and trying to run away from it. This format would only push Asians further into the “ other” category. An example of this can be seen in the pilot

episode where Margaret claims her love for a caucasian boy, but her mother wants her to date an Asian one instead. Margaret believes her caucasianboyfriend is more sophisticated and assimilated. This storyline sends the message that Asian men are inferior, and even Asian women refuse to date them. Additionally, the show was essentially a binary relationship in it of itself.

Cho’s character’s obsession with assimilating into American culture and her shame for her Korean roots served as the positive implication of the binary, and her Korean heritage and customs took the negative role in the relationship. At the time of its premiere, the American audience was so accustomed to seeing Asians in roles like Long Duck Dong and Charlie Chan that they were not ready to see an Asian in a “ normal” role, thus leading to the cancellation of Cho’s sitcom. If Asians want to be portrayed in a non-stereotypical manner, then why is it that All-American Girl, a show that did just that, fail to succeed? The first problem was previously mentioned: it was basically a binary. Instead of attempting to tell the story of an Asian family through the perspective of a Korean American family, the show took a degrading perspective. The second being that at the time, there was no normalization of non-stereotypical roles. If an audience sees something that they are not accustomed to, they will either have to suspend their disbelief or reject the idea entirely.

Although All-American Girl didn’t portray Asians in a stereotypical manner, the show wasn’t about normalization but rather shaming the Korean culture. A lack of normalization of accurately portrayed Asians in media is another

factor restraining Hollywood from creating non-stereotypical roles. Take the prominent model minority stereotype, for example. As stated before, constant exposure to characters who fulfill this stereotype will enhance the shared reality that all Asians excel in math and work in high paying careers. In a study conducted by the American Psychological Association to examine how constant exposure to the model minority stereotype contributed to the shared reality, 290 undergraduate students were presented with a description of individuals who were " diligent and hardworking. They do well in school, particularly in the area of math and sciences.

Both of them are on the honor roll. Despite the superior academic performance, they are quiet in class most of the time. With their achievements, they are expected to excel in their career in the future—with a well-paid and prestigious occupation" (Chao, Chiu, Chan, Mendoza, and Kwok 3). After being presented with this description, they were instructed to rate the similarity of three ethnic groups, African American, European American, and Asian American, to this model minority description. The results of this experiment indicated that the majority of undergraduates associated this description with Asian Americans. This shared reality has been normalized in today's culture instead of an accurate portrayal of Asians.

When it comes to these types of stereotypes, Shah argues that they are " controlling images that serve as part of a mechanism of social control of Asian Americans and Asians" (8). When images of Asians and Asian Americans are shown that do not fit into this typology, its viewers will reject

these images. This is exactly what happened with Cho’s All-American Girl, thus supporting the idea that what needs to happen is normalization of non-stereotypical Asians. We use stereotypes to make sense of the world, to draw boundaries, and to answer our questions about groups of people whom we are not familiar with. However, constant exposure to false ideas affect people socially.

Hollywood is in a position of power because it is an industry that heavily influences America’s way of thinking and perceptions. The issue with Asians’ stereotypes in Hollywood is not that other minority groups are being accurately portrayed and Asians are not. The issue is that Hollywood has been so accustomed to these habits that it is not making any progress in normalizing accurate Asian portrayal. As with anything new idea, there will be rejection and apprehension among viewers when they are exposed to an idea they are not familiar with. However, cancellation and resorting to old stereotypes is not a progressive direction to take.

The role of the newspaper industry in during the early Chinese immigration is proof that media influences our way of thinking, and Hollywood should take that into account and shape a new perception of the Asian race without having to rely on stereotypes. In addition, it is important that we as viewers keep in mind whenever we come across an Asian stereotype in media that it is simply a generalization of an entire race, and that this stereotype is not representative of every ethnic group within that race.