

MODELING A MINORITY: AN ANALYSIS OF ASIAN AMERICAN  
REPRESENTATION IN AMERICAN FILM

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
CHAPTER	
I. MODELING A MINORITY: AN INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. PARODYING PERIL: THE STRATEGIC RECONSTRUCTION OF STEREOTYPES IN BETTER LUCK TOMORROW AND PING PONG PLAYA.....	4
Works Cited.....	22
III. MODELING A MINORITY: SUMMARIZING THE ASIAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN THE JOY LUCK CLUB AND CRAZY RICH ASIANS.....	24
Works Cited.....	36
IV. THE POLITICS OF RACIAL BELONGING: JUSTIN CHON’S GOOK AND THE MANUFACTURED OPPOSITION OF BLACK AND ASIAN AMERICANS.....	37
Works Cited.....	48
V. CLOSETED IN MYTH: HOW THE MODEL MINORITY STEREOTYPE AFFECTS QUEER ASIAN AMERICAN IDENTITIES IN SAVING FACE AND THE WEDDING BANQUET.....	50
Works Cited.....	60

## **I. MODELING A MINORITY: AN INTRODUCTION**

Perhaps the most influential stereotype affecting Asian Americans today is the model minority myth, or the totalizing belief that Asian Americans are more capable of conformity and economic success than other immigrant or minority groups in America. Although the pervasive model minority myth is framed by the dominant paradigm as a bundling of positive assumptions about the intelligence and work ethic of Asian Americans, this stereotype ultimately harms Asian Americans and other minorities. The model minority myth is the idea that Asian Americans are inherently more likely to be successful and achieve the American Dream in comparison to other minorities (and sometimes to white Americans). The promotion of Asians as the “model minority” inherently posits the superiority of Asian Americans over Black and Hispanic Americans, fueling racial tensions between those that experience internal and external pressures to perform. Asian Americans who have internalized this myth experience a compulsion to achieve great success while other minorities endure constant comparisons to accomplished Asians as proof of their inferiority. Promotion of the myth by neoconservative politicians during the Civil Rights era was meant to provide a reason for the government’s refusal to provide welfare or social support systems to Black and Brown minorities; if Asian Americans were capable of succeeding in America, why would other minorities not be capable of doing the same?

The representation of Asian Americans in film is limited, although it has grown in recent years. When they are represented, Asian men are historically portrayed as emasculated in comparison to their white costars while Asian women function as submissive objects of exoticism; rarely are Asian Americans chosen for lead roles.

Regardless of measured success, stereotypical portrayals of Asian Americans are consistently presented as oppositional to the White majority; even when portrayed as model minorities, Asians are alienated and perceived as threats.

The model minority myth's adoption by some Asian Americans is in large part due to the conservative values the stereotype shares with many traditional East Asian cultures based in Confucianism, which largely emphasizes education and filial piety. Conservative America's focus on the nuclear family aligns with Asian family values, which prioritize a continuation of the family through heterosexual marriages and biological children. These values leave little to no room for queer Asian American identities to exist within either sphere, which is evidenced by the little representation afforded to them in media.

In order to analyze a more authentic Asian American experience, I have chosen for study only films written by, directed by, and starring Asian people: *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2003), *Saving Face* (2004), *Ping Pong Playa* (2007), *Gook* (2017), and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). All of these films offer distinctive depictions of the Asian American experience and feature characters dealing with various ramifications and consequences of the model minority myth. Unfortunately, due to the limited depictions of Asian Americans in film, and even fewer films made by Asian people and starring an Asian cast, the films selected are primarily Chinese and Korean stories. Until there is more Asian and Pacific Islander representation in American media, further scholarly exploration of the innumerable unique characteristics of such cultures in film is difficult. Nevertheless, I believe that the

characteristics of the Chinese and Korean cultures I discuss are relevant to many situations and encounters that typify the Asian American experience.

Those that champion the myth argue that the model minority stereotype has a positive effect on the Asian American community by combatting negative Asian stereotypes, but I posit the counterargument that framing all Asian Americans as infallible intellectuals with unlimited earning potential in our country's capitalist meritocracy does more harm than good; the myth effectively sterilizes the Asian American experience, confining our identities into restrictive societal roles that discourage individuality and punish natural human fallibility. Both in film and in reality, the model minority myth is detrimental to the wellbeing of all minorities as it creates and normalizes cultural pressures for Asian Americans to overwork themselves, it fuels racial animosity between Asians and other races, and it virtually erases any distinction between individual Asian communities or ethnicities.



## II. PARODYING PERIL: THE STRATEGIC RECONSTRUCTION OF STEREOTYPES IN *BETTER LUCK TOMORROW* AND *PING PONG PLAYA*

Western mainstream media's portrayal of Asian people has been unjustly limited to secondary roles and harmful stereotypes for decades, with the majority of alternatives to such depictions deriving from indie film productions or international markets. Even fewer forms of media specifically depict Asian Americans, with Asian performers typically being cast to play the role of a mysterious or comical foreigner such as Pai Mei in *Kill Bill Vol. 2* (dir. Quentin Tarantino, 2004) and Long Duk Dong in *Sixteen Candles* (dir. John Waters, 1984) respectively. A content analysis recently conducted by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media found that although Asians and Pacific Islanders together make up about 7.4% of the United States, "only 4.5% of leads or co-leads in the top 10 grossing domestic films from 2010-2019 are API characters; 5.6% of supporting characters are API" (McTaggart et. al. 2). Those that do depict Asian American characters usually opt for a character signifying the model minority stereotype; nerds, doctors, and martial artists dominate depictions of Asian Americans, although women are typically objectified and exoticized more often than their male counterparts. For those that do not fit the stereotype, the model minority myth's implication that Asian cultures play a major part in their success in America is ironically at odds with the children of Asian immigrants who have grown to be Americanized, causing many to reject their culture and what is expected of them to distance themselves from the myth altogether.

To illustrate this, I have chosen to analyze two films that are similar in their parodic approaches to addressing the model minority myth but dramatically different in

their portrayal of Asian American stereotypes: *Better Luck Tomorrow* (dir. Justin Lin, 2002) and *Ping Pong Playa* (dir. Jessica Yu, 2007), the former having been studied thoroughly by scholars for its use of typical Hollywood conventions to combat the model minority myth and the latter I believe has been unjustly overlooked.

*Better Luck Tomorrow* tells the story of Ben Manibag (Perry Shen), an Asian American high school student and an academic overachiever who has dedicated his formative years to chasing Ivy League acceptances and scholarships. Although Ben's academic success is genuine, it is also a façade masking the petty crimes he commits to escape the monotony of Californian suburbia along with his friends, disparate cousins Virgil (Vincent Hu) and Han (Sung Kang). The trio's petty crimes become profitable after Ben is approached by Daric (Roger Fan), another "academic all-star" who is involved in more extra curriculars than even Ben, to make cheat sheets that they can sell to other students. This quickly escalates from there; selling cheat sheets becomes selling drugs, ripping off electronics stores with credit card scams becomes nighttime heists, until eventually culminating in the murder of Steve (John Cho), a privileged, Asian American private-school student who hires the boys to rob his own home looking to give his parents a "wakeup call."

*Ping Pong Playa* follows Chris "C-Dub" Wang (Jimmy Tsai), an underachieving slacker who still lives with his parents and blames his failure to realize his dreams of becoming a professional basketball player on his Chinese genetics. Chris' family owns a sporting goods shop that specializes in ping pong supplies. His father, Mr. Wang (Jim Lau), was a successful competitive ping pong player in China before moving to the United States to give his family a better life. His older brother, Michael (Roger Fan), is

the poster child of the model minority myth; he has not only continued his father's legacy as a ping pong champion, but he is also a doctor and a major source of assistance to his parents. His mother, Mrs. Wang (Elizabeth Sung), teaches a ping pong class for local children at the community center. When Chris gets fired from his job selling cell phones at a mall kiosk and inadvertently causes his brother and mother to get injured in a minor collision, Chris reluctantly takes over for his mother's ping pong class while she recovers. When a rival British American ping pong school threatens to take his students, Chris enters the regional ping pong tournament in his brother's place and—with the help of his young mentees—learns responsibility and wins the tournament.

What is fascinating about comparing these films is the difference in their approaches to combatting Asian American stereotypes, *Better Luck Tomorrow's* protagonists code-switch between stereotypes of the model minority and yellow peril in direct contrast to *Ping Pong Playa's* protagonist, who does not fall into either category. Despite their difference in approaches, both *Better Luck Tomorrow* and *Ping Pong Playa's* portrayals of rebellious young Asian Americans provide Western audiences with images of Asian Americans that are at odds with the model minority myth, exposing them to alternatives to the stereotypical meek Asian introvert and reconfiguring these preconceptions into characters that are more humanized.

Internalization of the model minority myth can cause cultural rifts between younger Americanized Asians and older generations whose high expectations for their youth are exacerbated by the pressures exerted by such racial stereotyping. Immigrant parents' expectations often do not align with the American ideals of their acculturated children; cultural incompatibilities can make communication between parents and

children difficult or even impossible, especially with such an inviolable focus on filial piety in Asian cultures. The internalized pressure that the model minority myth places upon young Asian Americans in its attempts to categorize and label them causes them to turn to American culture to combat racial generalization. When first generation parents criticize the acculturated behaviors of their children, they risk further distancing between younger generations and their culture (Kao and Hébert 110). Conflicts such as the refusal of second-generation Asian children to learn their native language or their desire for more independence as they get older are common sources of frustration for first-generation Asian parents (Kao and Hébert 109).

In *Ping Pong Playa*, the relationship between Chris and his parents is a perfect example of cultural dissonance having an impact on the relationship between parent and child. Although they are not abusive disciplinarians, Mr. and Mrs. Wang do clearly show favoritism towards Michael and neglect Chris in certain respects. This is shown in the first ten minutes of the film. The first time we see the Wang household, we get a visual representation of how the Wangs view their sons. As Mr. Wang takes off his shoes and steps into the living area, the camera pans across a mantelshelf lined with framed photographs of Michael and Chris as they were growing up. The first image shows both Michael together as babies and is the only picture of the two of them together. Continuing the pan to the right, the next two pictures show the boys as young children. Michael's photo is a lot cleaner compared to Chris in terms of presentation; Michael is well lit and wearing a nice white suit, while Chris is poorly lit with a shadow cast over the side of his face nearest Michael's image. At a young age, it is clear that Michael is already overshadowing Chris both literally and physically. The next two photos continue the

trend, with another image of Michael in a nice suit while Chris is shown wearing a basketball jersey and a half smile. This photo in particular signals a potential turn in Chris' relationship with his father; Chris' adoption of basketball as his sport of choice over ping pong is a point of contention between himself and his father, who touts ping pong as a major part of Chinese history and culture. Continuing right, we get another photo of Michael smiling in a suit. No longer smiling, Chris sports a buzz cut and a purple Toronto Raptors t-shirt. The last two images on the mantelshelf are the most telling. Michael is depicted smiling and wearing graduation regalia; to his right, rather than a photograph of Chris sits a framed picture of the family dog. These last photos clearly show that the Wangs value educational success, and their display of Michael's achievements in the entrance of their home signals that the Wangs consider their children's achievements their own. Participants in a study on gifted Asian American adolescent males had come to the same conclusion regarding their own parents, observing that, "Asian American parents were inclined to look upon their children's strong academic performance and good conduct in school as one part of their own personal achievement" (Kao and Hébert 103). The Wangs' favoritism of Michael stems from his fulfilment of the model minority role, but the difference between Michael and Chris' demeanors can also be explained by their attitudes towards individualism.

Among Asian cultures, collectivism and filial piety are paramount in a family unit. Due to the heavy emphasis on Confucianism, especially in East Asian cultures, collectivism is favored over individualism and a preservation of familial lineages and hierarchies is strictly enforced. Younger generations are expected to be respectful and obedient towards older generations:

Dominant American culture is centered on the individual, whereas in Asian society, family units, rather than individuals, are highly valued. Individuals are given less priority and are looked upon as the products of previous family generations. Children are inculcated with the importance of family solidarity with family roles being interdependent. The needs of the family take precedence over those of the individual, and independent conduct that might harm the functioning of the family is discouraged. (Kao and Hébert 92)

Herein lies the main difference between Michael and Chris whereas Michael's academic and extracurricular pursuits are seen as practical and in support of the Wang family. Becoming a doctor meant that Michael could support himself and his parents financially, winning the regional ping pong tournament every year drove more business to Mrs. Wang's ping pong class and the family sports shop, and he is dependable when his parents need help around the house. Chris' endeavors are seen as individualistic and self-serving; thus, he receives little to no support from his family. Despite playing basketball throughout high school, Chris complains to his father that he never showed up to any of his games. While being interviewed about his role as a mentor to his young ping pong students, Chris expresses frustration at his parents' lack of encouragement:

Look, I'm just trying to keep it real, all right? I'm trying to teach them life lessons, you know, so they don't have to go through all the pain and humiliation and suffering I had to go through... You know, man, you think my parents supported my dream of becoming the first Chinese player in the NBA? Man, hell, no, man, it was always about, you know, "Go study, hit the books," man, "Go play violin." (Yu 23:06-23:30)

Living in his brother Michael's shadow and lacking the support of his parents, Chris physically could not escape the additional pressures of his family's culture and the model minority myth. The excessive pressure that is placed on Chris only exacerbates his individualism and rejection of his parents' expectations, placing even greater pressure on Chris to excel in his endeavors to prove his parents wrong. Unfortunately, this only results in Chris becoming delusional, beating younger children in games of pick-up basketball to give himself a false sense of superiority. Even when Chris initially offers to play in the ping pong tournament in his brother's place, Mr. Wong does not take him seriously and brushes him off. It is only after Chris accuses Mr. Wong of never telling him that he is proud of him that Mr. Wong agrees to train Chris, allowing their relationship to begin healing. Chris learns responsibility through embracing his culture and Mr. Wong learns to respect his son as an individual. It is through the mending of their relationship that *Ping Pong Playa* attempts to bridge the gap between rebellious, acculturated Asian American youths and their obstinate, traditionalist elders.

The meritocratic ideals that America's capitalist economic system naturally promotes is a major factor in the internalization of the model minority myth among Asian American's and their parents:

Until now, Asians have been persuaded that education is the avenue to high socioeconomic status. With this mindset, Asian American parents inculcate their children with a respect for learning as the most effective means of obtaining abundant material rewards rather than an end in itself. As a result, many Asian American students, under intense pressure, strive to attain academic excellence at all costs. (Kao and Hébert 92-93)

Confucian ideology's focus on education works in tandem with expectations for Asian Americans to excel to create a cultural belief in the model minority among earlier generations of Asian immigrant families. Such beliefs are what fuel the immoderate expectations of Asian American parents for their children's academic achievements, resulting in stereotypes such as the tiger parent. Although all of the children in the film are gifted and involved in numerous extracurriculars, *Ping Pong Playa* does not limit Asian parental depictions to overbearing tiger parents. Striking a balance between overbearing and inattentive, the parents of the younger children are clearly concerned with making sure their children are sufficiently intellectually stimulated—stereotypically so, as shown in a scene where Chris' students complain to him that if he cancels class their parents may put them in SAT prep classes despite only being in the fourth grade—but are also shown to care that they are capable of socialization, a skill that is typically considered secondary to education in strict Asian households. Chris meets one of these parents when he goes with Felix (Andrew Vo) to Prabakar's (Javin Reid) birthday party at the local bowling alley, where Prabakar and his father D.B. Reddy (Shelley Malil) introduced. The scene begins with Prabakar attempting to use mathematical equations to determine the best way to knock down the most pins. Prabakar's second attempt fails miserably as he launches a bowling ball backwards towards the party, crashing into something out of frame and eliciting a scream that makes Chris laugh hysterically. An Indian man in a pinstripe suit walks over to Chris and says, "It's a shame, isn't it?" to which Chris replies, "What's that, the nerds?... The birthday boy guy, he's the biggest nerd of them all." Nodding, the man agrees, "Yes, my son, the biggest nerd." Embarrassed, Chris begins to backtrack, saying, "Oh, I didn't mean it like that," but the



man stops him, “No, no, no, it’s quite alright. It’s a thing with my son. What good is it being able to play Rachmaninoff at age six if you don’t have an audience to play for, huh?” Chris replies, “Hey, man, I don’t mean no disrespect, but he ain’t gonna make no friends warming a piano bench, you know what I’m saying?” The man nods and agrees, then shakes Chris’ hand and introduces himself as D.B. Reddy. After Felix walks in and greets Chris with a complicated secret handshake, D.B. talks to Chris about his business in textiles and asks Chris if Prabakar can join his ping pong class: “Listen, most people underestimate the social skills needed to succeed in business. Prabakar doesn’t need more math classes. He needs to learn to socialize. To be a kid” (Yu 32:22-35:04). D.B. is representative of a different kind of Asian parent, one that is invested in their child’s success but understands the importance of socialization and the enjoyment of one’s formative years. A lack of social skills is what causes many Asian Americans to become trapped under the bamboo ceiling; those that were successful in their academic efforts but were too busy or simply did not take the time to socialize eventually struggle to move beyond middle management levels. Prabakar’s father defies the stereotype of the tiger parent to show an alternative that considers a healthy social life to be just as important as academics.

Comparatively, in *Better Luck Tomorrow* the characters’ parents are all entirely absent from the film barring mentions in conversation. The boys adhere so closely to the model minority myth that their parents do not feel the need to hound them about their behavior. As Ben explains, “Our straight A’s were our alibis, our passports to freedom. Going to a study group would get us out of the house until 4:00 in the morning. As long as our grades were there, we were trusted. We had it all” (Lin 12:00-12:12). The removal

of overbearing parents from the model minority equation alters the narrative from one based in Asian culture to one that is entirely American and individualistic; the characters' ambitions are completely rooted in the internalization of the model minority myth. However, this lack of parental guidance is a major contributor to the downward spiral that leads Ben down the path to Steve's eventual murder. Ben's progression from petty crime to more serious offenses is catalyzed by an unfulfillment with the petty rewards he has received for his excessive amount of work. He realizes this as a result of Daric's manipulation. After making the school basketball team, Ben is approached by Daric during practice for an interview. Daric asks Ben questions meant to frustrate him and make him question his place on the team, such as, "So, Ben, how do you feel about being a benchwarmer?" and, "Well, how do you feel about being the token Asian on the team?" then claims, "Well, it's obvious to everyone the only reason that you're on the team is for cosmetic ones" (Lin 16:40-17:30). The article that Daric writes is misleading and casts Ben as a byproduct of affirmative action whose position as a benchwarmer signals a racial injustice. The article is successful in rallying enough student outcry to pressure the basketball coach to put Ben in the game, however Ben quits the team immediately after. When Daric asks him why he quit the team, Ben gets frustrated and explains that he did not want everyone to think that he was only on the team because he was a token player. Daric replies, "Who cares what people think?... You know this is all bullshit, right? It's just a game. People like you and me? We don't have to play by the rules. We can make our own" (Lin 22:50-22:20). Daric then offers Ben work writing cheat sheets, which he initially declines but soon relents when he realizes that hard work is not enough to get everything he wants. This realization begins Ben and his friends' transition from model

students with a mischievous side to gangster manifestations of yellow peril.

The yellow peril stereotype is considered the opposite of the model minority myth; a “negative” stereotype rather than the model minority “positive.” However, neither stereotype is totally positive. Asians depicted as model minorities are typically feminized and submissive, whereas the yellow peril suggests a more masculine and dangerous vision of Asians, one based in a fear of Asian imperialism and sexual appropriation. Moreover, the stereotypes are not mutually exclusive, and the existence of either stereotype contradicts the basis of the other. As Yuko Kawai argues in their article on stereotyping Asian Americans in media, “When Asian Americans are stereotypically represented in media texts, their portrayals are ambivalent. If they are depicted mainly either as the model minority or the yellow peril, their representation entails the conflation of the two stereotypes” (110). The yellow peril and model minority stereotypes share many characteristics, but their designation is entirely constructed on how the various properties of the stereotypes are framed in relation to white supremacy. The quiet, regimented nature of the model minority Asian becomes a threat when those same characteristics are positioned as threatening to whiteness. When Asian Americans are depicted outperforming other racial minorities, they fall into the category of the model minority; when it is White Americans being surpassed, they become the yellow peril (Kawai 110).

*Better Luck Tomorrow* displays the ambivalence of Asian stereotypes at its extremes by portraying its cast of characters as both model students and organized criminals. As Kawai writes, “Stereotypes are subject to a binary meaning system rather than to a meaning system with many possible meanings because stereotyping is more

rigid than a simple meaning-making process and also tends to involve power inequality” (118). Ben and his group of friends transition between model minority and yellow peril throughout the film, displaying both binaries of the major stereotypes attributed to Asian Americans. Although Ben and the rest of the gang are no strangers to committing petty crimes such as underage drinking and distributing cheat sheets, their transition from model minority to yellow peril is not fully realized until the night they crash a classmate’s house party. Showing up without an invitation, the boys play the role of Asian imperialist invaders occupying a white space. They are confronted by a white jock and his group of friends who, threatened by the boys’ presence in their space, immediately begin antagonizing the boys, targeting them for their model minority statuses: “Hey, what’s up, boys? I think they have Bible studies next door, right?” They single out Ben, saying, “Oh shit, no, look at this! It’s the Chinese Jordan!” Irritated, Daric goes to check on Virgil who has been vomiting into a bush. On his way over, he intentionally bumps into the jock, who turns around and engages: “Yo, what’s up, shithead? Are you going to step up? You know, you got to play a real sport to wear that jacket.” Although they are wearing identical letterman jackets, the jock reduces the significance of Daric’s jacket because he earned it for playing tennis. In doing so, the jock positions himself as dominant over Daric and feminizes him, lessening Daric’s achievement as an athlete as a way to single him out as an unwelcome other. The two come to blows, with the jock punching both Daric and Ben. However, Daric escalates the situation by pulling out a pistol and pointing it at the jock: “Want your mom? Huh? You want the cops?” Excitedly, Virgil runs over, jumping up and down and shouting, “Shoot him in the face! Shoot him in the face!” Daric threatens the jock, “If I ever see you and

your fuck jock friends ever again, I'll fucking kill you!" (Lin 36:00-38:26). He knocks the jock to the ground and the camera cuts to a low angle shot looking up from the jock's crumpled body to Daric pointing the gun at the other jocks while Virgil kicks the jock repeatedly and Ben watches in horror until Han ushers them out of the party. When they all return to school on Monday morning, the boys have gained a reputation for their violence. Defeated, the jock is seen walking through the frame, sporting a black eye but no longer wearing his letterman jacket. In their failure to join the party without confrontation, they were otherwise successful in their domination of the jock and his group, establishing the group as a viable threat to the dominant culture of their school: "We had the run of the place. Rumors about us came and went fast and furious. One had us linked with some Chinese Mafia. And it was fine with us because it just put more fear in everyone" (Lin 45:00-45:12). Their new status among their classmates as the yellow peril affords the boys with more lucrative yet more dangerous and illegal opportunities; they begin performing heists and selling drugs, establishing their own crime ring under the safe guise of being otherwise model students.

The boys' double-identities as both model students and organized criminals concerned non-Asian viewers who were not used to depictions of Asian Americans where the role was not explicitly stereotyped as either the model minority or the yellow peril. Famously, Roger Ebert defended the film from another white critic who questioned the portrayal of Asian Americans at its premier at the 2002 Sundance Film Festival. In a video of the event, the critic asks, "You know how to make a movie, but why... with the talent up there and yourself make a film as so empty and amoral for Asian-Americans." Incensed, Ebert stands and replies, "What I find very offensive and condescending about

your statement is nobody would say to a bunch of white filmmakers, 'How could you do this to your people?' This film has the right to be about these people, and Asian-Americans have the right to be whatever the hell they want to be. They do not have to 'represent' their people” (Roger Ebert 0:00-1:04). Margaret Hillenbrand points out in their essay on *Better Luck Tomorrow* that similar criticisms would continue to be made by reviewers:

Critic Brian... storms that, "You could have replaced everyone in this movie with the cast of some lily-white show like Dawson's Creek and nobody would notice the difference. Yet Mackay's insistence that the east should act more "yellow" is, of course, precisely why the movie has something to tell him. Indeed, the awkwardness with which Ben and his gang act "white" is a joke not on them but on those audiences that prefer ethnicity to be served up straight and stereotyped.

(66)

With the recent surge of popular films featuring Asian American—United States and Canadian—stories, reviews of a similar nature have persisted. In a now pulled review published by CinemaBlend, one reviewer faced online backlash after referring to the animated film *Turning Red* (2022)—an animated film about a Chinese Canadian teenage girl and her experiences with adolescence—as “limiting in scope” due to its focus on the Asian community of Toronto. The reviewer also tweeted, in a post that was likewise later deleted, that the film is not for universal audiences and as a white man, described watching the film as “exhausting” (Shivaram). Such reactions to films featuring Asian characters that do not fit neatly into stereotypical roles is due to a comfortable reliance on the model minority and yellow peril myths. Because such stereotypes position Asian

Americans as othered and unable to fully assimilate, Asian characters that are not plain portrayals of either stereotype are seen as occupying white spaces. Ironically, if Asians are not portraying the yellow peril in media, it is the effort to portray Asian Americans as anything else at all that labels them as such.

*Ping Pong Playa* takes a different approach to parodying Asian stereotypes. As I mentioned before, Chris does not fit into either stereotype of the model minority or yellow peril. The film exaggerates Chris' immature loser persona for comedic effect; Chris is loudmouthed rather than quiet, constantly tells outlandish stories to make himself seem more impressive than he actually is, and proudly zips around on his best friend's minibike in lieu of buying his own car. Instead, the film flips the trope of the "foreign" Asian American on its head with the introduction of Gerald Harcourt, a British American ping pong competitor who Mrs. Wang allows to practice during her class. When Chris takes over for his mother while she recovers from her injuries, Gerald tries to poach Mrs. Wang's students in her absence. An ongoing feud between Gerald and Mr. Wang about whether China or England invented ping pong is Gerald's attempt to label the Wangs as foreign, but it is Gerald's intrusion on the ping pong class and his attempt to steal their students that positions Gerald as an imperialist threat. Chris even uses the Chinese phrase "wàiguó rén" to refer to Gerald as a foreigner when talking to Felix's sister Jennifer (Smith Cho), establishing Gerald as the outsider rather than the other way around. During the tournament, Chris' best friend JP (Khary Payton), a Black American man, rallies the Chinese members of the crowd to support Chris by warning them of Gerald's intentions and appealing to their minority statuses: "That guy wants to take students away from Chinese school. Away from their own culture... Think about it. You want a foreigner

leading the Chinatown parade? We minorities, we need to stick together” (Yu 1:10:43-1:11:27). By reconstructing the yellow peril stereotype, *Ping Pong Playa* effectively reverses the roles played by White Americans and Asian Americans, positioning the Asian American character as the defender of his own culture from a foreign threat. However, this does not mean that Chinese people are not still viewed as foreign, as is evident by the chairwoman’s warning to Chris when she mistakes his slang for Chinese: “Mr. Wang, please do not speak Chinese. The official language of the ATTF is American” (Yu 1:21:34-1:21:44). In the final match of the tournament, Gerald demands that Chris be disqualified for his refusal to remain quiet during his matches. Chris’ non-compliance to the tournament’s regulations results in him being punished, and despite the fact that Gerald has made racist remarks to Chris multiple times during the tournament, it is Chris that must remain silent for the rest of the match, or he will be ejected from the tournament. Chris’ initial refusal to conform to the oppressive rules of the tournament only to be threatened with removal is reminiscent of the conformity that the model minority myth demands from Asian American immigrants:

Over the past few decades, policy makers have regularly rolled out case studies of Asian American academic, entrepreneurial, and behavioral achievement as hard evidence that assimilation is indeed possible in the egalitarian, multiculturalist family of peoples that is the contemporary United States. Yet, this very rolling out is premised on racial difference that is rigidly invoked—and at the very moment that it is ostensibly denied. "Yellowness" is granted admission into America through the imitation of what the white hegemony sets down as good behavior, and is rewarded for this with the tag of model minority, a terminology that is,



needless to say, all about racial difference. (65)

The additional stipulations for Chris' participation in the tournament mirror the extra hoops Asian Americans are forced to jump through to comply with White American standards of conformity. Thus, in flipping the yellow peril stereotype while retaining their foreign identity, Chris acts as an Americanized Chinese person defending their culture from complete assimilation.

The parodying of stereotypes in *Better Luck Tomorrow* and *Ping Pong Playa* allows for the filmmakers to portray Asian Americans more dynamically, combatting assumptions without simply reversing them. As Hillenbrand warns,

...the battle against stereotyping will always be a self-defeating one, for the simple reason that to resist a stereotype is to acknowledge, at a basic epistemological level, its representational power, even when the traits it describes are inverted or strategically misassigned. (60)

*Better Luck Tomorrow* parodies stereotypes by having the characters embrace them, causing their lives to spiral out of control due to the absurd pressures such a lifestyle entails, despite the model minority myth's promise of a more comfortable life as a reward for compliance. The film parodies the high school genre film of the 1990s and places its leads in stereotypical roles normally occupied by white actors to draw attention to the lack of roles reserved for Asian characters; "by slotting Asian American men into these well-worn cinematic models of masculinity, the film gestures powerfully to the absence of any established paradigms that they can call their own" (Hillenbrand 64). *Ping Pong Playa* takes the opposite approach, displaying a lead character who is far from the normal preconception of an Asian American character in Western media. By portraying an Asian

American man who has been negatively affected by the additional pressures of his parents' cultural expectations in addition to the societal pressures of the model minority myth, *Ping Pong Playa* exposes audiences to an alternative to the Asian straight-A student or doctor so commonly seen in American film. The film also stresses the importance of socialization for young Asian American children and offers a way for unsupported younger generations to reconcile with their traditionalist parents. What both films stress is the importance of including more diverse portrayals of Asian Americans in Western media, particularly in significant leading roles.

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### III. MODELING A MINORITY: SUMMARIZING THE ASIAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN *THE JOY LUCK CLUB* AND *CRAZY RICH ASIANS*

*The Joy Luck Club* (dir. Wayne Wang, 1993) not only exposed Western audiences to the hardships endured by Chinese immigrant women and their children, but also demonstrated the marketability of an Asian-majority cast that does not rely on stereotypical Hollywood interpretations of Asian characters. Despite *The Joy Luck Club*'s commercial and critical success, it took twenty-five years before another major Hollywood film featured a predominantly Asian cast. The production of *Crazy Rich Asians* (dir. Jon M. Chu, 2018) was inspired by the success of *The Joy Luck Club* and sought to remind audiences of the bankability of Asian-led productions. The cast of *The Joy Luck Club* was relatively unknown to American audiences while *Crazy Rich Asians* starred well-established actors such as Constance Wu and Michelle Yeoh. While *Crazy Rich Asians* sought to increase the prevalence of Asian representation in American media, its potential shortcomings manifest in the way the film glorifies the reality of the Asian American experience in America; it ignores the social and racial inequities of America in favor of romanticizing the adaptability of Asian migrants. Describing the *Crazy Rich Asians* franchise as Asian Pride Porn, Yuan Ding writes:

If the African American racial uplift movement relies on a Horatio Alger narrative that unintentionally reinforces anti-black stereotypes and exacerbates class divisions within the African American community, Kwan's racial uplift narrative relies on the principle of free-market meritocracy that enables an Asian elite class to take advantage of a system that exploits the vast majority of Asian and Asian diasporic communities. In championing Asian economic ascension as the

foundation for racial uplift, the Crazy franchise attributes the economic and cultural flexibility of diasporic Asians to the unimpeded flow of global capital while obscuring the structural unevenness such movement perpetuates. (68)

Though significantly dissimilar in tone, the two films share a similar theme of second-generation Asian American children experiencing the consequences of hardships endured by their parents before immigrating; consequences of the ever-pervasive model minority myth permeate both films' narratives.

Due to the extreme and bourgeois subject matter of *Crazy Rich Asians*, one might think *The Joy Luck Club* portrays a more relatable and realistic experience of Asian American people. Even larger gatherings featured in *The Joy Luck Club* are dwarfed in comparison to the lavish parties in *Crazy Rich Asians*, featuring excessive amounts of bright fireworks, shiny supercars, and blaring music. *The Joy Luck Club* is rooted in more traditionally domestic spaces, focusing on mostly middle-class women and their immigrant mothers. In an interview, director Wayne Wang described the impact the film had on Chinese immigrants that shared similar experiences to the characters of the film:

When we were filming the scene, what was amazing was that during the rehearsal the whole row of extras could hear the dialogue. They were completely in tears.

An older woman came up to me later and told me she had to leave her baby during the war and never found it again. She really broke down. There's a lot there that the Chinese can identify with. (Tibbetts 5)

Despite the more grounded subject matter of *The Joy Luck Club*, scholars and critics such as George Tseo were dissatisfied with the film's portrayal of China and its people. Tseo's frustration with the Asian representation of the film is not an uncommon opinion among

Asian audiences; however, I believe that this frustration is misguided. I argue that it is not *The Joy Luck Club* that inaccurately represents Asian people; it is Hollywood that is guilty of this misrepresentation by limiting depictions of Asian people to this singular film for twenty-five years. *The Joy Luck Club* proved that Western audiences are receptive to films with an Asian-majority cast and twenty-five years later, *Crazy Rich Asians* reignited interest in such films, resulting in a surge of mainstream, successful Asian-led productions. Through the examination of generational class differences and the visualization of talk-stories, *The Joy Luck Club* and *Crazy Rich Asians* detail the struggles present in the Asian community between Asian American children and their immigrant elders.

In his article “Joy Luck: The Perils of Transcultural ‘Translation,’” George Tseo argues that the representation of China and Chinese people in both the film and the novel is flawed based on inaccuracies that Chinese audiences would recognize while Western audiences remain ignorant:

My wife, Fu Hui, can see things in *Joy Luck* that I cannot precisely because she was born and raised in China. In the places where I can only sense flaws, she sees them as clearly as if they were cracks in a crystal. Where I see nothing wrong at all and am as fooled as any Westerner with zero knowledge of China, she can define the cultural distortions exactly. (340)

Tseo claims that some aspects of reality have been sacrificed in both Amy Tan and director Wayne Wang’s attempt to make the story more accessible to American audiences. Text subtitling scenes featuring Chinese dialogue is inaccurate, and in some instances, the dialogue featured in the film and novel is atypical. I believe that this

dissonance is a result of the formation of the Asian American identity—Asian American children contextualize their elders’ Asian experiences within their newfound culture for self-reflection in various ways. This contextualization of inherently Chinese experiences is often done through the use and understanding of “talk-stories,” a form of intergenerational storytelling popularized by Maxine Hong Kingston in her famous memoir *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. These talk-stories are characterized as autobiographical tales about life in Asia blended with elements of legends or folktales. As such, talk-stories are typically hyperbolic or fantastical narratives rather than historically accurate chronicles. *The Joy Luck Club* uses these talk stories to communicate with American viewers—Asian or otherwise—in the same manner that Chinese mothers would communicate with their American children. On these Chinese narratives, Yuan Yuan writes:

China experiences are generally transfigured into “China narratives” only after they have lost their reference to China; thus they are related more to the present American situation than to their original context in Chinese society. The present American context provides meaning and determines the content of the China narrative. (292)

In *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator grapples with the talk-stories told to her by her mother and how their Chinese contexts fit into her own American lifestyle; the same mother-daughter dynamic is present in all four pairs in *The Joy Luck Club*. June (Ming-Na Wen), Waverly (Tamlyn Tomita), Lena (Lauren Tom), and Rose (Rosalind Cho) all gain insight and grow from the talk-stories shared by their mothers, but only when they finally manage to contextualize their mothers’ experiences within their own American



lifestyles. The embellished nature of these talk-stories is the source of Tseo's grievances with *The Joy Luck Club*, as the recontextualization of Chinese experiences into talk-stories introduces inaccuracies to the plot. For example, Tseo views Auntie Lindo's (Tsai Chin) story of how she managed to escape her loveless and abusive marriage to a teenage boy in China as particularly problematic: "Auntie Lindo's perception, if true, would be exceptional. What occurs after she does become a bride is not merely exceptional, it verges on the impossible... If accurate, Auntie Lindo's account describes a lunatic mother-in-law or one possessed of the most extreme gullibility" (340). Tseo is right about the unrealistic nature of Auntie Lindo's anecdote, but I think that the nature of her talk-story is justified by her character while also remaining true to Chinese mythology; in Tseo's own review, he cites the Chinese novel *The Western Pilgrimage* as potential inspiration for the tale due to its themes of immaculate conception. As far as Lindo herself, it makes sense that she would structure her talk-story in a way that portrays her as clever enough to devise a ruse convincing enough to release her from her marriage. Throughout the film, she is shown to be very self-assured and competitive, pitting her daughter Waverly against June when they were children and only admitting that Suyuan (Kieu Chinh) was a better cook after she was already dead. Lindo also establishes herself as an unreliable narrator when it is revealed over a game of Mahjong that she lied about the contents of the letter June's sisters sent from China. When confronted by An-Mei (Lisa Lu) and Ying Ying (France Nuyen) about her deceit, Lindo protests, "How can I tell her what the letter really say? Then she never go to China, never go to see her sister. Am I right? Yes, of course." Lindo justifies her lie as necessary to ensure that June will make the trip to China. The inaccuracies in her talk-story are justified in a similar way,

guiding Waverly—and viewers—to better understand her.

Similar to *The Joy Luck Club*, *Crazy Rich Asians* begins with its own talk-story, contextualizing a Chinese experience from filmmakers to viewers instead of from mothers to children while also indicating to viewers just how crazy rich the Young family really is. Writing about the series of novels *Crazy Rich Asians* was based on, Ding notes that “In multiple encounters between racist white characters and wealthy Asians, the latter emerge triumphant through pure meritocratic market competition, enacting the often self-fulfilling revenge fantasies of (post)racial justice” (68). *Crazy Rich Asians* begins with such a fantasy when Eleanor (Michelle Yeoh) is able to outplay the racist hotel manager by employing her family’s wealth and buying the hotel outright. The film opens on a stormy night; the large, stylized captions in the center of the frame inform us of the setting: “London 1995.” The film cuts to the interior of the Calthorpe hotel where two employees are standing behind the front desk. One employee does a double take as the Young family walks in, which initially seems to be a reaction to a young Nick (Nevan Koit) wiping his muddy shoes all over the pristine white floor. His incredulity is otherwise quickly revealed to be directed towards the Young family’s race when he pretends to check the hotel’s ledger and dismisses Eleanor, claiming that the Youngs do not have a reservation despite Eleanor’s confirmation with him the day before. Suddenly the manager of the hotel Reginald Ormsby (Daniel Jenkins) appears from behind the desk and asks if there is a problem. When Eleanor repeats her request that her family be shown to their room, Reginald sarcastically responds, “You must have made a mistake. I’m sure you and your lovely family can find other accommodations. May I suggest you explore Chinatown?” He even denies Eleanor the use of the hotel phone—which is placed on the

counter directly in front of her—forcing her family to venture back out into the heavy rain to use a phone booth in the street. After a heated phone call with her husband, Eleanor and her family return to the hotel where the manager approaches them aggressively, threatening to call the police when suddenly the owner of the hotel, Lord Calthorpe (Peter Carroll) enters the room from a personal elevator. The manager begins to apologize to Lord Calthorpe for the disturbance, but Calthorpe walks right by him, greeting Eleanor with open arms. He demands that the manager prepare the Lancaster suite for the Young family, eagerly proclaiming the Young family as the new owners of the hotel, with Eleanor as the new “lady of the house,” much to the manager’s surprise. Within the span of a few minutes, Eleanor uses her financial power to best the racist hotel staff when it would have been much more reasonable (and cheaper) to simply secure alternate accommodations (Chu 1:00-3:30). I believe that the filmmaker’s decision to begin the film with this revenge fantasy draws a connection to the motives behind making the film in the first place. Prior to its release, various Asian influencers took to social media to promote the film, citing the importance of its release to Asian Americans as the reason that it must succeed. The financial success of the film—the budget is reported as being thirty million dollars and the box office sales being \$238.5 million—is itself a realization of a revenge fantasy against conventional Western media, proving that the lack of Asian-led productions in Hollywood has been costly. However, the film does unwittingly perpetuate the model minority myth in its quest for increased Asian visibility, alienating Asian Americans from other minorities.

Corinne Mitsuye Sugino takes issue with this method of overcoming racism, describing the capitalist system as violent and the use of purchasing power as a tool for

confronting the oppressing group as dangerous. Sugino writes:

Here, racial liberation is constrained to a vision in which escaping racism is only possible by climbing the ranks of hierarchy instead of seeking to eviscerate it. The effect is not only that substantive liberation from anti-Asian racism is circumscribed, but any semblance of freedom is possible only through the perpetuation of more violence. (4)

Another major problem with this strategy of overcoming racism through the accumulation of wealth and status for Asian Americans relates back to the model minority myth; it places additional stress upon Asian Americans to exceed already demanding expectations. Not only do Asian Americans have to succeed to feel valid in their Asian identities, they also must be successful enough to nullify the effects of racism. We see this in *The Joy Luck Club* when Rose is accosted by Ted's mother about Rose's relationship with her son. The viewer is informed through Rose's narration that she had "never been around people like this," but the looks on Ted's parents' faces make it clear that this is something they had already assumed about her. Ted's mother suggests to Rose that because she is Asian, Ted's relationship with her would be problematic for Ted when he inevitably assumes control over his father's business. Citing the Vietnam War as a source of agitation for Ted's future business partners, of whom she describes as "people of a different standard," Ted's mother is trying to make Rose feel inadequate as a partner in hopes that she will be encouraged to leave him (Wang 1:26:00-1:27:43). While race is a clear factor in Ted's mother's attempt at manipulation, I doubt that Rose would have been treated the same way if she had come from an equally or even more successful family than their own. It is only through Ted's intervention and insistence that Rose

manages to overcome his parents' racism, not through her own actions or merit.

The model minority myth is often defended due to its promotion of "positive stereotypes"; however regardless of the "positive" nature of such stereotypes, they are just as capable of causing damage as negative stereotypes. June is the perfect example of an Asian American woman that has been negatively affected by the model minority myth promoted by both American society and her community, including her own mother. Battling constant comparison to Waverley from adolescence to adulthood, June has always been made to feel inadequate in her mother's eyes. In adulthood, June's feelings of inadequacy are intensified as she finds herself in competition with all three of her childhood friends. Her frustrations come to a head during one of the last dinners June had with her mother. When June passive-aggressively confronts Waverley about the unpaid work she had done for Waverley's firm, Waverley dismisses June, mocking her work and telling her that she lacks style. June is then humiliated by her mother, who openly agrees with Waverley, saying, "True. Cannot teach style. June not like Waverley. Must be born this way" (Wang 1:51:40-1:53:44). As they wash the night's dishes, June confronts her mother with a sarcastic and pained apology for being a disappointment, citing her own poor grades in school, her less than prestigious career, and her status as an unmarried woman. June is the opposite of everything that the stereotypical Asian American is expected to be, and it has clearly had a detrimental effect not just on her relationship with her mother, but also on her mental health. Her feelings of inadequacy are not uncommon among young Asian Americans struggling to meet the incredible standards set by their parents and American society.

Unfortunately, the American system of meritocracy does tend to value Asians

over other minorities and uses that comparison of perceived merit as a basis for discrimination against Black and brown people in the United States. This sociopolitical factor makes the depiction of so-called “positive Asian stereotypes” in American media a potentially problematic double-edged sword. However, I would argue that inclusion of well-to-do Asians in American media, such as those seen in *Crazy Rich Asians*, is necessary for the progression of positive portrayals of Asian Americans. Additionally, the overall theme of the film does not necessarily promote wealth as the only avenue for overcoming adversity. In fact, I would argue that it advises against it. The protagonist of the film, Rachel (Constance Wu), faces adversity in the form of the community of bourgeois elite that her boyfriend Nick (Henry Golding) belongs to, particularly from Nick’s mother, Eleanor. Eleanor makes it clear to Rachel that she disapproves of Rachel’s relationship with her son, telling Rachel, “I know this much. You will never be enough” (Chu 1:11:56-1:13:15). Frustrated by Eleanor’s disrespect, Rachel takes the advice of her friend Peik Lin Gok (Awkwafina), who suggests that Rachel prove her worth to Eleanor by demonstrating her ability to fit in with the Asian elite. She imitates the upper-class women through an extravagant makeover and confident demonstration of self-worth at Colin (Chris Pang) and Araminta’s (Sonoya Mizuno) wedding, catching Eleanor’s attention, but ultimately, her attempt at upward mobility fails to gain Eleanor’s approval. It is not until Rachel meets with Eleanor after refusing Nick’s proposal that she finally proves herself. Meeting with Eleanor over a game of Mahjong, Rachel reveals that Nick proposed to her and promised to leave his family behind forever; the revelation visibly shocks Eleanor, who fears losing her only son. Rachel allows her a second to panic before telling Eleanor that she turned him down, eliciting from Eleanor a sigh of

relief before she says, “Only a fool folds a winning hand.” Rachel does just that, physically and symbolically, through the game of Mahjong. Rachel picks up the tile she needs to win the game and places it in her row, saying “If Nick chose me, he would lose his family.” Removing the winning tile from her row, she continues, “And if he chose his family, he might spend the rest of his life resenting you.” Rachel holds the winning tile in her hand for a second before placing it back amongst the free tiles, allowing Eleanor to add it to her own row. Eleanor reveals her winning hand and says, “So you chose for him.” Rachel tells her:

I’m not leaving ‘cause I’m scared or because I think I’m not enough. Because, maybe for the first time in my life, I know I am. I just love Nick so much. I don’t want him to lose his mom again. So I just wanted you to know that one day, when he marries another lucky girl who is enough for you, and you’re playing with your grandkids while the tan huas are blooming and the birds are chirping, that it was because of me. A poor, raised by a single mother, low class, immigrant, nobody.  
(Chu 1:42:18-1:46:30)

Rachel turns over her tiles as the music flares solemnly but triumphantly, revealing to Eleanor that she allowed herself to be defeated. This scene shows that Rachel did not earn Eleanor’s respect through upward economic mobility, but through her own intelligence and compassion. Her ability to walk away disproved Eleanor’s preconceived notions of Rachel’s unsuitability, causing Eleanor to rethink her prejudices against Rachel for being a middle-class Asian American woman.

The importance of both *The Joy Luck Club* and *Crazy Rich Asians* to the Asian American community cannot be overstated, regardless of personal opinion. In America’s

capitalist meritocracy, economic success of Asian media is the only surefire avenue to guarantee that our voices remain audible to the rest of the country; the recent surge in popularity of Asian American and East Asian film and television such as *Parasite* (dir. Bong Joon-Ho, 2019) and *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (dir. Destin Daniel Cretton, 2021) is proof that Western audiences are receptive to such stories. My hope is that, in time, Asian representation in American media will continue to grow and expose Western audiences to the vast diversity of the Asian community, completely eliminating the monolithic sentiment of Asian Americans that has been so prevalent in this country's history.



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#### **IV. THE POLITICS OF RACIAL BELONGING: JUSTIN CHON'S *GOOK* AND THE MANUFACTURED OPPOSITION OF BLACK AND ASIAN AMERICANS**

The adverse effects of the model minority myth are not limited to Asian Americans; the myth has also had lasting effects on other minority groups, particularly African Americans. As is typical of white hegemony, this tool keeps minority groups at odds with one another, through a model that places Asian Americans on a pedestal above other minorities in some respects yet limits them in others. Unfavorable comparisons to Asian Americans have caused other minority groups to resent their Asian neighbors:

The friction between African Americans and Korean Americans was exacerbated by prevailing stereotypes about the two groups—the popular imputations of African Americans as indolent, economically dependent, or violent and of Asian Americans as hardworking, self-sufficient, and law-abiding, worthy of being named the "model minority." (Cheung 7)

Justin Chon illustrates the immense strain that these invidious distinctions place on the relationship between Asian and African Americans with his film *Gook* (2017). *Gook* follows two Korean American brothers, Eli (Justin Chon) and Daniel (David So) struggling to run their family's shoe store in Paramount, California. The brothers are unwelcome in the neighborhood, as is demonstrated by the constant harassment and attacks they endure from other members of the community. They are targeted primarily because of their race; however, it is their friendship with Kamilla (Simone Baker), an 11-year-old African American girl, that draws the wrath of her older brother Keith (Curtiss Cook Jr.). Set in 1992, *Gook* takes place during the conclusion of the Rodney King trial and the boiling point of years of racial tension in California. Against the backdrop of the

L.A. riots, *Gook* illustrates how the model minority myth perpetuates animosity between Asian Americans and other minorities, inciting tension and even violence on the basis of racial competition and perceived inferiority.

Chon's portrayal of the animosity between Korean Americans and the other minorities living in Los Angeles County is not black and white. Each character displays particular racial biases and attempts to justify them through past experiences and skewed perspectives, leaving the viewer to question each character's motives and try to understand how their perceptions of either community has affected them. Eli and Daniel establish where they stand in relation to the racial divide in a scene early on in the film. While on her way to the shoe store, Kamilla makes a stop at the liquor store across the street to buy a drink and some cigarettes, greeting two taggers out front who rudely tell her, "Shut the fuck up." The store's proprietor Mr. Kim (Sang Chon) watches Kamilla like a hawk, muttering in Korean, "I'll kill you if you steal anything." As Kamilla walks back to the counter, the camera follows her gaze and pans to a box of Twinkies to her right. Kamilla puts her money on the counter, staring at the Twinkies as Mr. Kim grabs her a pack of cigarettes from behind the counter. She tells him about some men vandalizing the front of Mr. Kim's store, sending him running out to chase them off. Shortly after Kamilla arrives at the brothers' shoe store, Mr. Kim barges in, grabbing Kamilla and accusing her of stealing. Daniel tries to break them up, but Mr. Kim strikes Kamilla right as Eli walks in. Infuriated, Eli grabs Mr. Kim and shoves him out of the store as he and Daniel curse and shout at him to leave. The camera focuses on Kamilla watching from inside the store, holding her hand to the side of her face that Mr. Kim struck. She opens the door and shouts at Mr. Kim, "I didn't steal nothing from you, you

blind old man!” Mr. Kim turns to her and points accusingly, yelling, “No, I saw you steal my Twinkie!” Eli tells Kamilla to get back inside and admonishes Mr. Kim, “Are you fucking serious right now? All this over fucking Twinkies?” Eli pelts Mr. Kim with a crumpled dollar bill and tells him to leave. The pair continue to shout at each other as Mr. Kim walks back across the street to his store, with their confrontation ending with one last “Fuck you!” from Mr. Kim (Chon 12:15-16:15). By protecting Kamilla from Mr. Kim, Eli and Daniel show that they are willing to do what is right, regardless of race. For the brothers, race is not a factor in such an altercation; although Kamilla did steal the Twinkie, Mr. Kim’s actions were harsh and unnecessary. The scene establishes that while Eli and Daniel are victims of racist assumptions, they will not allow these to cloud their own judgment.

Mr. Kim, on the other hand, acts as the stereotypical racist Korean store owner, as seen in numerous films and television shows released in the aftermath of the L.A. riots, such as *Menace II Society* (1993) and *Falling Down* (1993). Such an image of Korean stores had been formed well before then by Black Los Angeles community members, who at the time felt they were constantly being racially profiled and overcharged by Korean American proprietors. Relations between the Black community and Korean store owners were further strained by the unlawful killing of Latasha Harlins, a 15-year-old African American girl who was shot by Soon Ja Du, a Korean American convenience store owner for allegedly trying to steal a bottle of juice only thirteen days after Rodney King became a victim of police brutality. Du was convicted of involuntary manslaughter, but the judge’s decision to suspend her 10-year prison sentence only outraged the Black community even further, since they perceived the lenient sentence as proof that Asian

Americans were valued more than African Americans. *Gook* references the death of Harlins in a second altercation between Mr. Kim and Kamilla when Mr. Kim pulls a gun on Kamilla for refusing to leave his store. The death of Latasha Harlins would be referenced in numerous other forms of media, such as Ice Cube's second studio album *Death Certificate* (1991) released only 8 months later. The 15<sup>th</sup> track on the album, "Black Korea," while only 47 seconds long, illustrates both the racial profiling endured by Black customers in Korean stores and the racist sentiments African Americans felt in turn:

Every time I wanna go get a fuckin' brew

I gotta go down to the store with the two

Oriental one penny countin' motherfuckers

.....

They hope I don't pull out a gat and try to rob

They funky little store, but, bitch, I got a job

.....

So don't follow me up and down your market

Or your little chop suey ass'll be a target

Of a nationwide boycott

Juice with the people, that's what the boy got

So pay respect to the black fist

Or we'll burn your store right down to a crisp

And then we'll see ya

Cause you can't turn the ghetto into black Korea (Jackson 1-3, 7-8, 12-19)

“Black Korea” acts as a warning to Korean American store owners and as a rallying cry to African American listeners. The song represents the hostility between Black and Asian American proprietors while simultaneously voicing African Americans' anxieties that Korean immigrants were altering their communities. Viewing the Korean American members of their communities as invaders rather than neighbors, Black Americans feared that Korean Americans were unlikely to assimilate.

The large number of Korean storefronts present in Los Angeles at the time were a result of Korean immigrants purchasing cheap stores from white owners desperate to leave what had become predominantly Black neighborhoods. Their sudden presence and perceived economic dominance in such communities made African Americans feel as though they had been skipped over: “The premise was that African Americans have been waiting in line for a longer time, and that more recent arrivals must go to the back” (Ikemoto 304). Because African Americans had been present in the country for longer than Asian Americans, they considered themselves to be more American than Asians, who still struggle to this day with being labelled “foreign.” Differences in culture and language have allowed hegemonic narratives to ascribe an inability to assimilate to Asian Americans. Thus, while the model minority myth promotes Asian American superiority over African Americans in terms of scholastic and economic success, it casts their ability to adapt socially in a negative light:

...Asian Americans were historically more privileged in certain areas of society than Blacks and less privileged in others. On one socioeconomic plane, while Blacks suffered from being labeled as inferior in areas such as education, intellect and economic well-being, Asian Americans have often been praised as the “model

minority" for achieving successes that other minority groups should strive to emulate. On another plane, while Asian Americans suffered from being characterized as perpetual foreigners unable to fully assimilate into mainstream U.S. society, Blacks have enjoyed more privilege in this area as they are seen as less of a "foreign" face. (Da 315)

The juxtaposition of Asian Americans as superior but foreign and African Americans as inferior but American allows for either group to position themselves relatively closer to whiteness, depending on the situation. According to Ikemoto, such racial positioning is a consequence of white supremacy, and “would not be coherent, could not take place, but for racism” (306). In a scene where Eli takes Kamilla out for lunch, she acts as a voice for the people in the neighborhood when he asks why she hangs out with the brothers. “Why not? I mean, who will protect you guys? No one in this neighborhood likes you.” Eli admits that what she says is true, prompting Kamilla to imitate what she has heard from her neighbors: “They’re all like, ‘Look at those Chinese people, coming into our neighborhood and ripping us off. All them gooks, they be selling shoes that they be getting from the swap meet’” (Chon 23:00-23:20). Judging from Kamilla’s mimicry of the neighborhood, the other members of the community do not consider Eli and Daniel as belonging to the community. They incorrectly refer to the brothers as Chinese to label them as foreign, stereotypically assuming that they are making money off of them through underhanded means, and constantly refer to them with the racial slur “gook.” By positioning themselves as true Americans and the brothers as foreign, the Black members of the community inadvertently participate in white supremacy by positioning themselves as closer to whiteness than the Korean American brothers in a justification for their

racism.

Although Chon portrays Eli and Daniel as not particularly prejudiced, they are not exempt from experiencing racism at the hands of their community. Racial positioning as a result of the model minority myth has created an "us s vs. them" mentality among minority groups, diverting blame away from white hegemony. According to King-Kok Cheung, the stereotype of the Asian model minority was popularized in the 1960s as a means to counter calls for political and social reforms during the civil rights movement:

This image was used by neoconservative pundits to cast a negative reflection on other racial minorities, particularly African Americans: if Asian Americans could do so well despite the fact that they too had been victims of racist practices such as the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Japanese American internment, why couldn't African Americans also succeed? Why should the government do anything to help racial minorities? All the other minorities could just follow the Asian American example. (7-8)

Much of the racism Eli and Daniel experience in the film is a direct result of racial positioning, with Asian Americans operating as a stand-in for the dominant white population that is largely absent in the lower income areas of Los Angeles. As business owners, the brothers are stereotyped by their customers. While tabulating a customer's bill, the woman claims that Daniel is overcharging her for the shoes and that the final total does not add up. Daniel responds, "It does add up. There's taxes on these things," to which the woman claims false advertising. Daniel explains, "Listen, taxes don't go to me, okay? The taxes go to the government. We all got to pay that stuff." Incredulously, the woman says, "You people always trying to rip us off." Offended, Daniel replies, "You



people? Bitch, you act like you ever heard of fucking taxes before. No, no fuck it. Bounce.” The woman storms out, but not before turning back to Daniel and yelling “You damn chink” (Chon 19:25-20:05). However, the racist attacks Eli and Daniel experience are not limited to their roles as store owners. Latino gang bangers jump Eli at the beginning of the film simply for standing out. Daniel is robbed by Keith and his friends after they hear the not guilty verdict of the Rodney King trials, and again he is specifically targeted by Black rioters looking to violently take out their frustrations. As Daniel rides into South Central with his music producer, a group of Black men drag Daniel out of the passenger side of the car and start beating him; notably, they leave Daniel’s Black music producer alone. The timeline of Soon Ja Du’s suspended sentence for Latasha Harlins’ death shortly before the verdicts of the Rodney King trials positioned Korean Americans alongside the officers that brutalized Rodney King as protected by the government from punishment for crimes against African Americans, fueling further animosity towards Asian Americans.

The myth of Asian superiority is responsible not only for racialized resentment against Asian Americans, but also for some Asian Americans’ own racial biases. Belief in this worldview can cause some Asian Americans to internalize such beliefs, creating a sense of superiority over other minorities. A study done on the connection between Asian Americans who internalize the model minority myth and anti-Black attitudes found a strong correlation:

We found that greater internalized MMM, particularly achievement orientation, was directly associated with greater anti-Black attitudes. Thus, when Asian Americans believed that their racial group was more academically and

economically successful because of their stronger values in achievement and hard work compared to other racial minorities, they were more likely to believe that Black Americans did not possess such values and therefore were less successful.

(Yi and Todd 7)

Mr. Kim is the perfect example of an Asian American who has internalized the model minority myth and unfavorable stereotypes of other minorities. Many of Mr. Kim's biases have been formed by his own experiences. Having immigrated from Korea, Mr. Kim would have seen the racial division of the US military in South Korea as well as in establishments such as restaurants and brothels, which are still racially segregated today (Cheung 7). In a rare moment of peace between Eli and Mr. Kim in the second half of the film, Mr. Kim explains that his hostility towards customers stems from the first time a customer stole from him when he still worked with Eli's father at the shoe store:

I got along with the customers and worked really hard. One day, a customer came in for a pair of New Balance... and I went to the back stock room. I knelt down and helped him tie his laces. But this little bastard jumped up and ran away with the shoes. It happened so suddenly. There was nothing I could do. I just knelt there dumbfounded. After that I saw all the customers as crooks. (Chon 1:05:00-1:06:42)

Mr. Kim let his experience with one customer affect every interaction he had afterwards, fueling his animus towards Black customers. He tells Eli, "Your father and I came here to give you kids a better life" (Chon 1:06:42). Mr. Kim and Eli's father considered America to be somewhere that success would be achievable, but Mr. Kim does not feel that the same success is within reach for African Americans based on his assumption that any

who enter his store are likely thieves. For Mr. Kim and real-life Asian Americans who adopt the model minority myth, their own sense of superiority depends on the belief that they are more capable of success compared to other minorities.

Divisions between Black and Asian communities still exist today, due in part to the further promotion of this paradigm in popular culture, with social media in particular sowing division through unfiltered and inaccurate racist comparisons. A recent event similar to the L.A. Riots that reignited racist comparative discourse was widespread protest over George Floyd's death. Images of Korean American store owners rallying together to defend their storefronts during the L.A. Riots resurfaced as internet memes, many of which were posted by conservative social media users as a response to the unrest following the publicized footage of George Floyd's murder. Users sharing the images of these Korean store owners began referring to them as "Rooftop Koreans," championing them as an example of an appropriate response to damage of public property. Such images were shared as propaganda, praising the Koreans depicted as the model minority and the African American rioters as violent thugs. According to Ikemoto, the strategy of depicting such images is a common tactic of racist groups:

Recall, for a moment, the much-photographed Latasha Harlins and Soon Ja Du, gangmember looters, and armed Korean storeowners. These images have merged into the African American/Korean American conflict plotted by the master narrative. They operate by informing and reinforcing the identities created for conflict. The result: Shoplifter, looter, and gangmember images are re-inforced as the operative aspects of African American identity; crime-victim, gun-toting merchant, and defender-of-property images emerge as the Korean American

character types. Thus, apparently race-neutral categories—criminals and property-owning crime victims—become part of African American and Korean American racial identities. (307)

In reality, these images were shared as a justification for violence and presented as an argument for strengthening promotion of the Second Amendment. White conservative men such as Kyle Rittenhouse and members of the Proud Boys were compared to images of these “Rooftop Koreans” as a way to validate their stance of prioritizing property over human life. Ironically, Korean shop owners did not shoot and kill a single rioter in 1992. *Gook* references the Korean store owners seen defending their stores during the riots near the end of the film, but Eli and Daniel decide to alter the assumed narrative. When Keith and his friends come to rob the store of all their expensive sneakers, Eli, Daniel and Kamilla hide with the shoes on the roof of the store. Tired of the constant pain and suffering the two have endured since taking over the store, Eli and Daniel throw the shoes down from the roof in slow motion as soft piano music plays. Their actions in this scene are reminiscent of the Korean store owners of 1992, but rather than pointing guns the brothers decide to prioritize life over property.

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**V. CLOSETED IN MYTH: HOW THE MODEL MINORITY STEREOTYPE  
AFFECTS QUEER ASIAN AMERICAN IDENTITIES IN *SAVING FACE* AND  
*THE WEDDING BANQUET***

If Asian Americans are underrepresented in Western media, then queer Asian American representations are even more scarce. Although not an aspect of the model minority myth that is sufficiently discussed, queer identities within the Asian American community are treated as a major deviation from the heteronormative expectations that a so-called “successful” life in America would entail. The expectation that Asian Americans are more likely to achieve the American Dream is not limited to an individual’s scholarly and economic successes; it also implies the successful formation of a nuclear family unit. As a means to unfavorably compare other minority groups to Asian Americans, the model minority myth insists that Asian Americans are more likely to conform to traditional heteronormative family values such as filial piety, a two-parent household, and having biological children. These values align with the traditional values of many Asian cultures, resulting in an internalization of the model minority myth that ironically breeds a sense of superiority over western culture in older generations of Asian immigrants. Homosexuality presents a challenge to such values, confronting the validity of the model minority myth and threatening the patriarchal elements of some Asian cultures that prioritize a continuation of familial lines. As Long T. Bui argues,

A reconsideration of Asian American families in light of queer social formation pushes against the popular tendency to posit them within heteronormative framings of Asian Americans as “model minorities” with good familial upbringing. (130)

Younger generations of queer Asian Americans whose identities do not align with heteronormative family values must contend with the expectations of both their cultural background and those of the model minority. On the other hand, the model minority myth can also act as an additional layer of cover for closeted Asian Americans looking to conceal their identities from the potential disapproval of their families, legitimizing a focus on work and school as an excuse for a lack of heterosexual relationships. In this sense, the model minority myth excludes queer Asian Americans on the basis of promoting strong family values yet also assists in shielding them from stigmatization, alienating those that do not pretend to conform with traditional heteronormativity from their families and the dominant paradigm while simultaneously providing an additional alibi to those that do.

As seen in Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet* (1993) and Alice Wu's *Saving Face* (2003), Chinese parents in particular struggle with cultural disconnects that arise as a result of Chinese culture and internalized racism clashing with the non-traditional identities of their children. According to Qijun Han, homosexuality is viewed as a threat to Chinese family values and reputation, which relies heavily on the continuity and prosperity of familial lineage:

A family's prosperity is then, to a degree, the measurement of family reputation – also called “family face”. It is generally accepted among Chinese communities that family reputation occupies a central position in establishing family ethics. The family member is expected to perform his or her role properly to maintain the family reputation. As such, face-saving is important, and strongly monitored by the community. (329)



This pressure to maintain their family's continuity and reputation is evident in the pressures the protagonists of both films experience from their parents and peers to marry a partner of the opposite sex. Although the films differ in that they feature a male and female protagonist respectively, they are thematically very similar in the strategies both protagonists use to mask their homosexuality and in their resolutions.

In *The Wedding Banquet*, Wai-Tung Gao (Winston Chao), a gay Taiwanese American living in New York City with his white boyfriend Simon (Mitchell Lichtenstein), concocts a scheme to hide his homosexuality from his parents and end their attempts at matchmaking. Simon suggests Wai-Tung arrange a marriage of convenience to his Chinese immigrant tenant Wei-Wei (May Chin), who agrees to the marriage to secure herself a green card. When Mr. and Mrs. Gao (Sihung Lung, Ah-Lei Gwa) visit Wai-Tung in New York, they are pleased to find Wei-Wei to be a suitable wife for their son but are mortified by Wai-Tung's choice to be unceremoniously wed at city hall. To further appease his parents, Wai-Tung relents and allows an old family friend to arrange an extravagant wedding banquet, during which both Wai-Tung and Wei-Wei consume an inordinate amount of alcohol. Drunkenly, Wei-Wei seduces Wai-Tung, resulting in Wei-Wei becoming pregnant. Although Wei-Wei's pregnancy initially sparks conflict among the co-conspirators that leads to Wai-Tung outing himself to his mother, the baby also turns out to be the eventual resolution.

Its title a reference to the aforementioned "family face," *Saving Face* focuses on Wil (Michelle Krusiec), a young Chinese American lesbian working as a surgeon in Manhattan. Wil is initially able to hide her homosexuality from her widowed mother, Hwei-Lan (Joan Chen), by playing along with Hwei-Lan's efforts at matchmaking.

However, the façade becomes difficult to manage after Hwei-Lan is banished from her family's home in Flushing when it is discovered that she is pregnant and refuses to reveal the father's identity, forcing her to move in with Wil. As Wil develops a relationship with Vivian (Lynn Chen), an accomplished ballet dancer and daughter of the head of surgery at Wil's job, Wil must contend with pressures from both her mother to find a boyfriend and from Vivian to come out of the closet and publicize their relationship. Although Hwei-Lan does not initially support Wil's homosexuality, she eventually learns to accept Wil's identity after Wil teaches her to accept her own.

Due to the difference in distances between the protagonists and their families, Wai-Tung and Wil utilize different strategies for either testing their family's tolerance for homosexuality or hiding it altogether. Wil prefers to remain in the closet both privately and publicly, pretending to entertain her mother's attempts to set her up with Chinese men to appease her family privately and hesitating to display affection towards Vivian publicly. Wil takes advantage of her status as a model minority, hiding behind her career as a promising young surgeon to avoid confronting her sexuality. For example, when Hwei-Lan criticizes her wardrobe as being too "boyish," Wil's grandmother defends her, citing the practicality of her shoes as more appropriate for someone that works on their feet all day. Although some of Wil's friends and co-workers know that Wil is a lesbian, she is still uncomfortable about outwardly displaying her sexuality. Wil promises Vivian that she will be there the entire night for Vivian's birthday, but her anxiety about meeting Vivian's friends pushes Wil to take on more surgeries than are expected of her, causing her to show up well after everyone has already gone home. Wil's prioritization of career success over success in her relationship later backfires when Vivian's father Dr. Shing

asks Wil to end her relationship with Vivian so as to not hold her back. He asks Wil if she loves Vivian, but Wil is unable to answer. He continues, “If she doesn’t take this job in Paris, she may never realize her greatness” (Yu 1:06:49-1:07:50). Fearing a publicly intimate relationship with another woman, Wil uses Vivian’s job opportunity as an excuse to break off their relationship rather than affirming her feelings for Vivian and asking her to stay. Will shields herself from scrutiny by adhering to the model minority myth, but her sexuality is in direct conflict with the concept.

Wai-Tung’s efforts to negotiate his relationship with his parents in light of his sexuality differs from Wil’s in scope and complexity. In his article “Stretched Kinship: Parental Rejection and Acceptance of Queer Youth in Chinese Families,” John Wei describes multiple strategies that queer Chinese youth have implemented in the past to hide or slowly reveal their sexual preferences. Unlike Wil, Wai-Tung has the advantage of living in a separate country from his parents, allowing him to use a strategy John Wei calls “stretched kinship,” a relationship structure that has been figuratively stretched by the long-distance between parents and their children and is continually stretched by prolonged periods of separation, renegotiated expectations of marriage, and sometimes even stretching connections to include others in an attempt to further hide the queer person’s sexuality through fake relationships (5). Wai-Tung stretches his kinship with his parents by blaming his lack of a girlfriend on high standards. When his parents attempt to sign him up for expensive matchmaking services, Wai-Tung stretches it even further by playing along with their efforts but lists unreasonable requirements as his standards for women he would willingly match with. After Wai-Tung’s parents manage to send a girl to New York to meet him, he stretches the kinship to its limit by arranging a marriage of

convenience to Wei-Wei. However, Wai-Tung's efforts to appease his parents are further complicated when Mr. and Mrs. Gao invite themselves to stay with him in his apartment in New York.

In an effort to hide his living situation and relationship with Simon, Wai-Tung tells his parents that Simon is his roommate and landlord. In doing so, Wai-Tung's strategy has inadvertently shifted from a stretched kinship structure to a strategy that Wei critiques as outdated called the "coming out as coming home" strategy:

...which refers to a process that one brings home a same-sex partner as a "good friend" who will then regularly and frequently stop by and join in quotidian family activities from recreation to daily chores. Gradually, this "good friend" will be accepted as a family member, which often leads to the silent acceptance of the same-sex relationship by the family even without a conspicuous coming out.

(4)

During their time in New York, Simon earns Mr. and Mrs. Gao's admiration through his actions; he acts as Wai-Tung's best man at the wedding, helps Wei-Wei cook traditional Chinese dishes, and takes care of Mr. and Mrs. Gao during their visit, helping Mr. Gao in particular through physical therapy. In part through demonstrating his domesticity Simon is accepted by Mr. Gao as a member of the family, but Mr. Gao's flexibility is in large part due to Wei Wei's pregnancy.

Pregnancy and the continuation of family lineages are important elements to both *The Wedding Banquet* and *Saving Face*. Focuses on family values and lineage continuities are sentiments shared by conservative American communities, allowing for such values to fall in line with the model minority myth. Chinese cultural expectations

cause the protagonists of both films to experience unhealthy amounts of pressure from their families to get married and have children in spite of their homosexual identities. Although Wil and Wai-Tung's sexualities are known to their friends and co-workers, neither protagonist is open about their homosexuality with their families in large part due to the homophobia present in traditional Chinese culture.

However, homosexuality poses a threat to these Chinese family values, deviating from the Confucian family norms, undermining family lineage and destroying family reputation. Therefore, homosexuality is almost consensually regarded as being "undesirable," especially among the older generations concerned about family continuity. (Han 329)

Although family values are not exclusively heterosexual ideals, homosexuality is seen as being in direct conflict with Chinese values and the model minority myth's promotion of the nuclear family as the traditional standard and biological children as preferable for lineage preservation. This explains the stipulations for Wil and Wai-Tung's families' acceptance of their homosexuality.

Both films' protagonists come out to their mothers, who both have a similarly negative reaction, denying that their children were born gay. It is a common sentiment among Asian American immigrants that homosexuality among young Asian men and women is an unfavorable side effect of westernization:

In the Chinese immigrant community in the United States, homosexuality is often portrayed as influences of western culture and a sign of the rejection of one's own ethnic culture in favour of acculturation to a more powerful 'white' culture...

Homosexuality is generally considered to have elements of contagion that should

be eradicated, or an abnormal behaviour that can be corrected, as it poses a threat to the modern Chinese family. (Han 330)

Homosexuality is not considered a naturally occurring phenomenon among Chinese immigrants, which is apparent in how each character's mother tries to blame their child's sexuality on outside stimuli. In the case of mothers, this deflection of blame is done in defense of themselves, as birthing and raising a homosexual child is considered a poor reflection of their family and motherhood. Westernization is blamed as a convenient scapegoat for such a divergence from Chinese culture, as it removes the blame from questions of upbringing and cultural values. Although the denial of homosexuality aligns with the model minority myth, the displacement of blame onto western ideals is quite ironic.

Wil's mother, Hwei-Lan, already knows about Wil's sexuality before the events of the film, having walked in on Wil having sex with a woman in her apartment once before. However, Hwei-Lan is in denial of Wil's sexuality, pretending that what she witnessed never happened. After breaking up with Vivian, Wil comes home and tells Hwei-Lan that they need to talk. Sitting out of frame, Hwei-Lan insists that whatever it is can wait until her show is finished. Wil walks over and joins Hwei-Lan on the couch. Both women focus on the television as Wil says, "Ma. I love you, and I'm... gay." Without diverting her gaze, Hwei-Lan responds, "How can you say those two things at once? How can you tell me you love me then throw that in my face? I am not a bad mother. My daughter is not gay." Wil's lip begins to quiver, and her eyes start to water, but she does not look away from the television as she replies, "Then maybe I shouldn't be your daughter" (Yu 1:12:06-1:13:38). Hwei-Lan's reaction to Wil's confession is similar

to how her own father reacted to her pregnancy; she considers it a personal affront and outright denies her daughter.

Similarly, Wai-Tung's mother Mrs. Gao tries to blame multiple sources for Wai-Tung's sexuality and never actually comes to terms with his identity. Wai-Tung comes out to his mother in an act of frustration in a hospital waiting area after his father suffers from a stroke, revealing his long-term relationship with Simon. Hearing this, Mrs. Gao exclaims "It's not true!" as Wai-Tung paces back and forth in front of her. She asks if Simon led him astray, to which Wai-Tung replies, "No one led me astray. I was born this way." The news leaves Mrs. Gao in shock, questioning, "What went wrong?" as if there were a way for her to have corrected her parenting to prevent Wai-Tung from becoming homosexual (Lee 1:20:25-1:24:20). Mrs. Gao does not believe him, citing Wai-Tung's past girlfriends to desperately try and prove his homosexuality as a recent lifestyle change rather than a natural occurrence. Later, while preparing soybeans with Wei-Wei, Mrs. Gao says, "Maybe it's only temporary. He may get over it. Maybe a woman hurt him, and he developed a psychological problem." When Wei-Wei tells her that it does not work that way, Mrs. Gao relents, but continues, "But maybe once he sees his child, he'll get back to normal" (Lee 1:39:14-1:39:53). Mrs. Gao even reacts poorly when Simon tries to hug her while saying goodbye, recoiling and gasping as if Simon could infect her with homosexuality. At no point does Mrs. Gao admit that Wai-Tung could have been born gay, despite him telling her so, because she fears admitting as much would place the blame on her.

In both films, it is the renegotiation of cultural expectations in the face of non-traditional connections that allows for the families to excuse and accept the protagonists'

identities and behaviors; both feature a pregnancy conceived through unusual circumstances, and both include romantic partners that prove their worth through domesticity and/or economic prosperity. In *The Wedding Banquet*, Mr. Gao reveals to Simon that he not only speaks a little English, but he also has known about Simon's relationship with his son from the start. Simon starts to suggest that Wai-Tung will be happy to hear of his father's approval, but Mr. Gao stops him and insists that it remain a secret between himself and Simon. When Simon questions why, Mr. Gao responds, "For the family. If I didn't let them lie... I'd never have gotten my grandchild" (Lee 1:35:30-1:36:30). Although Mr. and Mrs. Gao do not understand Wai-Tung's sexuality, they find security in knowing that their lineage remains secure, and that Wai-Tung is taken care of domestically by Simon. In *Saving Face*, Hwei-Lan's pregnancy with Little Yu's child takes the pressure to maintain the family's lineage off of Wil, at least temporarily. Hwei-Lan learns to accept Wil's sexuality after Wil stops Hwei-Lan's wedding to Mr. Cho, and despite Dr. Shing's earlier urgings for Wil to break up with Vivian, he relents and accepts their relationship at the end of the film, saying "At least she's marrying a doctor." Although the intricate relationships that culminate in each film's resolution can be convoluted, these films illustrate how Asian Americans with similar ideals to those featured are not necessarily invariable and are capable of adjusting their values to accommodate those that do not align with their own.



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