



**“Underrepresentation of Asians in Hollywood Films and
Television”**

By Carl Octavo

The Undergraduate Research Writing Conference

• 2020 •

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey



RUTGERS
THE STATE UNIVERSITY
OF NEW JERSEY

Carl Octavo

Professor Lilley

Final Draft

Underrepresentation of Asians in Hollywood Films and Television

Introduction

The labels created for Asian American actors are a result of stereotypes and discrimination that the public has generated against Asian Americans. In Hollywood movies and television shows, there are fewer Asian American actors playing major roles compared to Caucasian actors. In the research paper, the theory of ethnicity will be used to frame the root and possible causes of discrimination of Asian American actors. The effects of ethnicity and an actor's chance of success in Hollywood will be explored by examining the effects that racial characterization has had on Asian actors. The research question to guide my examination of this issue is: How has the portrayal of Asians in movies and television affect society's view towards them? What are the factors that decrease the chance for the success of an Asian actor or actress in Hollywood? The use of racial vocalization to characterize an actor negatively reinforces the idea that Asian Americans are different from other Americans who do not speak with a similar voice. Lack of major roles offered to Asian Americans stunts their growth of being able to expand upon minor roles as they lack the experience necessary to be able to gain longer screen time and play a more serious character. The screen time that an Asian American will often land is relegated to comic relief, or further stereotyped to feed the idea that Asian Americans can only play one-dimensional characters who cannot offer much to the main story. The lack of financial success is a huge concern for Hollywood productions in casting Asian actors. However, films such as Crazy Rich Asians have shown that minorities in lead roles are able to produce

blockbuster films. To fix the problems of unequal casting in Hollywood, the multiculturalism of the cast is necessary to promote a more equal and even opportunities for all minority actors.

Racial Vocalization and Undermining Ethnicity

Racial vocalization serves to ostracize and stereotype Brown actors because it has become a common trope depicted on the big screen, and it abuses their ethnicity to make an example of how a person's voice separates them from others. In Hollywood, depictions of Asians through racial vocalization of one's character creates an image that is unrealistic for their culture. The voice of one's character is confined by a person's physical appearance as a character played by a minority character stands out from the usual Caucasian actor or actress. Commonly, "Brown voice" is used to set up a negative connotation for Brown actors, as it is often associated with people who often will speak English poorly. According to Shilpa Davé, Brown voice "is the act of speaking in accented English associated with Indian nationals and immigrants and is a combination of linguistic and phonetic markers that include stress points on particular words, cultural references, and words out of order" (Davé 143). As a result of the overuse of Brown voice for Asian actors, audiences associate seeing an actor with a Brown complexion as someone who will also use Brown voice for their character. Typically this role is played by an actor of Brown complexion, whether they were born or associated with India at all. Brown voice stunts the growth of Brown actors as the intent of its use in movies and television is to show the poor English speaking skills for an Asian American. The abuse of Brown voice for Brown actors and actresses has a negative influence on Asian Americans in the acting industry as its over reliance decreases the availability of roles for Brown actors and actresses to roles that racially profile them. Alienation of Brown actors and actresses from Hollywood due to racial vocalization is a result of how a person's ethnicity determines their depiction in movies and television. In Werner

Sollors *Theory of Ethnicity: a classical read*, a line from Max Weber's Essay, *Ethnic Group*, points to the problems associated with stereotypes in society, "Persons who are externally different are simply despised irrespectively of what they accomplished or what they are, or they are venerated superstitiously if they are too powerful" (Sollors 52). Hollywood chooses to marginalize minority actors and actresses as a result of preventing their growth in the acting industry. Stunting their growth can be attributed to the appearance of Asian actors and actresses in juxtaposition with their Caucasian counterparts. Due to physical appearances, Asian actors are treated as being different beings who are not able to play many roles that requires greater effort than playing comic relief or as a side character. The aspects of appearance are used to compare and contrast the heightened differences of two characters. Roles fulfilled by Asian actors and actresses are "disparaging/unflattering... it only heightens the minority's juxtaposition against sustained themes of White glamorization" (Gardner 55). The marginalization of Asians in the acting industry has been used to fetishize the image of Caucasian actors and actresses. The utilization of Brown actors and actresses through Brown voice in contrast to their Caucasian counterparts sets up failure in their advancements in their acting career by relegating them to fulfilling a minority role.

Racial vocalization perpetuates untrue stereotypes of Brown actors and actresses, which is used as a barrier for their growth into being able to land lead roles. Max Weber's view of people who are externally different is related to the problem of Brown voice brought up by Davé which is used to distinguish a character who is foreign and different from the rest of the cast. A problem with alienating a character from the rest of the cast is it creates an unequal dynamic that treats the foreign character unequal to the rest of the cast. Davé brings up the challenges of fighting the brown voice by mentioning the show *Master of None*. The main character, Dev, is

an Indian American who is at odds with obtaining a successful acting career without having to resort to playing up a stereotype (Davé 142). Racial vocalization prevents the success of Asian American actors as it adds little to no complexity to their character, offering no substance of growth to their acting career. The actor Aziz Ansari is able to bring up the issues of racial vocalization for Brown actors and actresses by addressing it through his character whose roles stereotype his ethnicity. Brown actors and actresses are at odds of finding roles that do not perpetuate the Brown voice stereotype of Brown characters found in television and film portrayal. Jaison Gardner explanation of minority portrayal in film and television captures the struggles of escaping the stereotypes of an actor's ethnicity "many minority images actually perpetuate character patterns rooted in historical stereotypes that have been modified over time."(Gardner 47). The images of Brown actors and actresses being associated with Brown voice are a result of the repetition of the representation of these stereotypes in Hollywood. As a result, when a Brown actor or actress appears on the screen, there is an implied connotation that Brown voice will be utilized to set up a dynamic between the Asian actor actress and their counterparts. Min-Ha Pham comments on the consequences of how Hollywood has chosen to portray Asians in the media "Asian Americans have to bear as a consequence of the dominant culture's conflation of Asian Americans' lived through experiences and Hollywood's exotic representation of Asians" (Pham 122). Brown actors have been treated as exotic through Brown voice, to differentiate themselves from Caucasian actors. The one-dimensional view of Brown actors through racial vocalization hurts their chance at being able to overcome the challenges of minority actors as Hollywood's failure to cast Brown actors beyond playing a minority role limits Brown actors to the scope of characters that they can play. A one-dimensional characters does not raise the full potential of an actor or actress, and as a result, Brown voice is a barrier for

Brown actors from being able to land in more serious and leading roles as their filmography will be limited to the same minor roles that use their ethnicity as juxtaposition to Caucasian culture.

Challenges of Asian actors in starring in leading roles are indicative of how their earlier minor roles are damaging to their careers. Being relegated to minor roles hurts their chances of being able to land major roles as often, these roles are reflective of ethnical stereotypes. Joann Lee comments on the roles that Asian actors are often handed “Asians are often cast as adjuncts to main characters to fulfill various functions-often ethnic parts as dictated by particular genres” (Lee 177). Being cast to fulfill a minority character hurts Asian actors as it abuses their ethnicity to juxtapose them from their Caucasian counterparts. The lack of casting Asian American actors to major roles has often been tied to the lack of stars that are able to handle the pressures of playing a huge role. According to screenwriter Max Landis, the reasoning for not enlisting Asian Actors into any major roles is “There are no A-list female Asian celebrities right now on an international level,” he said, admonishing viewers for “not understanding how the industry works.” (Chow 2). Due to the lack of A-list Asian actors, Hollywood producers and executives are hesitant in casting actors played by an actor of Asian ethnicity due to the lack of ability to draw interest from the general audience. However, the lack of Asian A-list actors and actresses are not solely to blame for the lack of representation for Asian Americans in movies and television shows. Due to the lack of opportunities offered to Asian American actors, they are not able to jump at major acting opportunities compared to other counterparts. Asian actors and actresses composed of less than 5% of lead roles in all film roles in 2017 (Wolf 21). Instead, actors are instead cast as a martial arts expert or a weak and nerdy character. The reinforcement of these characters tropes does not shine a bright image on the representation of Asians according to Pham “It's not something we inherit. *Crouching Tiger* and other Americanized

representations of Asia aren't so innocent. They reinforce our identity as outsiders and strangers" are from a build-up of film roles that help perpetuate such stereotypes" (Pham 122). Pham notes that US society has shaped their view of Asian Americans from experiences in film and television. As a result, they associate Asian Americans from playing limited roles. Once an Asian American actor acts out of the line of this role, it causes confusion and uncomfortableness in the person as their expectations are not met. Sollors notes the weakness of people being unable to disassociate stereotypes in Williams James essay, *On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings*, "Now the blindness in human beings, of which this discourse will treat, is the blindness with which we are all afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves" (Sollors 34). The discourse faced by people is not holding those different from them in a different light. A major discourse faced by those in Hollywood is the challenge of racial vocalization with "brown voice". The blindness seen in Hollywood is created from the roles Asian actors were cast to play. Allen Walzem notes how media have similarly painted a blind picture of Asian representation "the warped images of Asia that American media firms have developed for their own audience's needs" (Walzem 2). American media has intentionally fixated the roles that Asian Americans play as they believe to produce a greater profit, it is necessary to focus on meeting the audience's expectations. Characters that use racial vocalization are relegated to playing minor roles, and it is preventative of showing off the complexity of acting that an actor can offer. The lack of complexity played by Asian Americans in the roles they play prevents them from being able to be cast into major roles due to racial characterizations associated with Asian Americans.

Character Development in Asian Roles

Racial characterizations of Asian American characters stunt the growth of the roles offered to them as they are fixated on playing stereotypes to being able to garner the most profit. Stereotypes of Asian characters in film and television are profitable due to their overuse as seen by Brown voice for Brown actors, or as martial arts experts as was the case after Bruce Lee's rise to stardom (Walzem 3). Without another breakout character, Asian American actors will be stuck in a continuous loop of playing up to stereotypes or a minor role in television and movies. A lack of diversity is a huge problem as the public will be more likely to make movies with an Asian lead less seriously than other movies due to the lack of precedent before. Joann Lee notes the striking reason for the lack of Asian superstars in Hollywood "the cultural message is determined by what will sell in the marketplace. In this environment, choice is limited by what the cultural image-makers deem is commercially viable" is that Asians are not seemed as marketable as other races (Lee 182). Profitability is a leading reason for the lack of diversity in major roles as casting minorities in these roles is deemed as non-profitable and not viable at all in the media market. Exploring the idea of Asian actors forming different identities than what is already established in the market seems futile as Hollywood is more focused on the marketability of Asians. The capability of Asians in Hollywood is limited "Because cultural products are inextricably linked to meanings derived from the people working in culture industries, at stake in the production of popular culture is the ability for various social groups to develop and disseminate their own meaning systems." (Erigha 79). Films that feature Asian characters are in control by those who are on the production side of media products. As a result, there is a power struggle for Asian actors to fight against racial characterization as the films and television shows that represent their characters are in the authority of producers, who see stereotypes of Asians as means of financial success. As Asians make up a minority of the population, only making up 5.6% of the total US

population, there seems to be no need for the expansion of their roles as there is no mass market seeking out Asian leads(NYU). Due to making up a minority of the acting industry, Hollywood believes the profitability of Asians to be lower than their Caucasian counterparts who make up the majority of the population. The negative consequences of this have caused harm to the characterization of Asian actors as they are forced to rely on racial characterization in their roles to land roles in film and television, which creates unfair opportunities for their potential growth in Hollywood. Nishime comments on the discourse of race for minorities “Race is discourse not speech. Rather than understanding race as an utterance of the body, believing the body to “speak” its racial identity, we would do better to view race as an effect of a communicative exchange. The instability of race means that we craft racial categories, which are instantiated from moment to moment.” (Nishime 152). Racial characterization for Asian actors comes as a result of using a person’s appearance as a means of how people communicate with each other. People are judgemental off of physical appearances when comparing them to others. The character development of actors has heavily relied on an actor’s ethnicity when comparing them to others, as minority actors often stand out next to their Caucasian counterparts. However, the solution for the problems of lack of character development is fixed by the inclusion of multiculturalism, as mentioned by Pham “In the Asian invasion, multiculturalism functions to abate the paranoia that has traditionally accompanied the other Asian invasion scares and, at the same time, to re-present and reactivate a particularly American drama of assimilation and socialization” (Pham 122). By gathering a more diverse and multicultural cast, the problems of character development and roles played by Asian actors and actresses can be solved as it will help relieve any beliefs that they can be just as appealing and marketable as Caucasians in the acting industry. Multiculturalism is not a quick solution to the problems of racial characterization

of Asian actors, but it helps to slowly break down barriers that are preventing the evolution of Asian actors from being able to land lead roles. The inclusion of minorities to an expansion of roles, instead of using their ethnicity as a plot point helps to break away from the reliance of racial characterization in establishing a minority character.

Financial Concerns in Casting Minorities

Asian actors and actresses are prevented from being able to land leading roles, as their financial success and marketability are not seen as profitable compared to their Caucasian counterparts. Garnering a profit is important for media productions as their success is dependent upon what will garner the most interest. Due to making up less than 5% of the total US population, is there really a market for film and television shows where there is an Asian leading cast (NYU)? Since the US population's majority is Caucasian, there are more likely to be Caucasian actors in acting roles. So, it would make sense that to appeal to the market, you should shoot movies and shows that will appeal to your largest audience. Filming movies without appealing to your biggest market then becomes a challenge once a director decides to stray away from the moneymaker, and instead attempt to film with a diverse cast in mind. The theory of customer discrimination, according to Kuppaswamy, is based on "discriminatory hiring as an economically efficient response to changes in demand" (Kuppaswamy 2). Hollywood's refusal of hiring Asian Americans into lead roles is due to the lack of demand for Asian leads, which is linked to Asians making up a minority of the US population. It would not be financially sound to cast an Asian lead, so the lack of films with Asian leads has been excused due to the lack of a target demand for such films. Vasey comments on the financial goals that Hollywood has in mind "the economic imperatives of global distribution. As Frederick Herron told... concerning *The Cuban Love Song*, "It is not a question . . . of the sensibility of these things, but it is a

question of dollars and cents." (Vasey 638-639). Hollywood seemingly discriminates against minority groups as their focus is on the "dollars and cents" that is more important in earning than giving a fair chance towards minority actors (Vasey 638). It seems to be unproductive to not give a chance to Asian Americans a lead role in blockbuster films, or television shows as it will perpetuate the belief that minority groups are not able to sell as well in the market compared to their Caucasian counterparts. Hollywood sets up Asian actors up for failure as their concerns about financial success turn them back as they believe they won't be as marketable as their Caucasian counterparts.

However, financial concerns in the minds of Hollywood do not make up for the lack of diversity found in films. As Kuppuswamy notes, "Unequal hiring in cultural industries, therefore, becomes not an act of discrimination but one of economic necessity". (Kuppuswamy 2). The unequal hiring of minority groups has negative effects for the cultural background of minority groups. A negative effect of casting minorities to non-important and minor roles is it downplays their background, and instead will focus on using their cultural background as their main characteristic. And as Gardner points out "Minorities should not bear the entire responsibility for repairing an image they were not solely responsible for creating" (Gardner 61). The failure of the lack of diversity should not be blamed on the concerns of financial failure, as minority actors should not be held accountable for the challenges of how their image is viewed in the media. Fixing the problems on the lack of diversity should be focused pivot towards more multiculturalism in the cast of television and films. Dealing with the challenges of introducing multiculturalism to film, Erigha explains "cultural products are inextricably linked to meanings derived from the people working in culture industries, at stake in the production of popular culture is the ability for various social groups to develop and disseminate their own meaning

systems...experiences of diverse groups of cultural laborers will give us greater insight into the system in which societal culture is produced and why stereotypical and limited creative visions might emerge from it” (Erigha 79). The creation of films with a diverse cast is necessary for helping the understanding of the importance of casting minorities in film. A solution to the lack of diversity in film is by encouraging the spread of diverse cast films. Having films with a more diverse cast can help better create a more diverse environment in the film industry. Though Hollywood is most concerned with keeping the same profit, it is necessary for the further encouragement of multiculturalism to prevent any further separation between ethnicity and the status of the roles an actor or actress can play.

Rising trend of Opportunities

The Hollywood market has recently seen a rise in the number of films with Asian American leads, which is helping to mend the idea that for a film to be successful, there needs to be Caucasian lead to help garner a great profit. Films such as *Crazy Rich Asians* are leading the way for the rise in films with more prominent Asian representation. With the market being filled with films featuring Asian actors and actresses, it is giving more opportunities for them to be able to accept a wider variety of roles. The film helps to defend against the concept of the model minority, which as Susan Paik mentions is “the Asian immigrant who achieved success through hard work and perseverance” (Paik 2). The model minority is a toxic concept that Asian immigrants are only successful because of their working nonstop, which is often untrue. With the release of the film *Crazy Rich Asians*, it dispels the notion of how successful Asians are a result of the model minority, as Hollywood finally gave a chance for Asian actors to represent the majority of the cast. *Crazy Rich Asians* is the first major Hollywood film since *The Joy Luck Club* and the most successful romantic comedies of the decade (Le 525). The impact that the film

will have in the future of Hollywood is it will help appeal to executives that films with a minority leading cast will still appeal to nonminority groups. In other forms of media, Asian Americans are viewed as “perpetual foreigners and often marginalized as outsiders,” who seem out of place when compared to their Caucasian counterparts (Le 527). Positive portrayal of Asian Americans helped reinforce the idea that Asian Americans are not completely different compared to their Caucasian counterparts. Therefore positive and increased portrayal of Asians in film and television mitigates the impact that a person’s ethnicity has on how others view them. Max Weber’s view that “People who are externally different are simply despised” has changed over time as the recent exposures of Asians in the lead roles is making Hollywood more open to the idea that Asian actors are just as capable as their Asian counterparts (Sollors 52). However, Crazy Rich Asians alone should not be used as an example of Asians being further accepted into Hollywood. More films then Crazy Rich Asians or television shows need to be produced to help further the growth of Asians in Hollywood. As Le points out, Crazy Rich Asians should not be solely future “narrative plentitude[s]” of Asians in Hollywood (Le 527). Future films and shows are necessary for not only the increase of minority representation but also the prevention of racial characterization of Asians in film and television. Showing that Asians are capable of acting in the same scenarios as their Caucasian counterparts help to transition their appearance in Hollywood to greater lengths than before. The rise of Asians in film and television is relying on the continued push towards the inclusion of minority actors in future roles, as seen by the release of the film Crazy Rich Asians.

Conclusion

Racial vocalization, as depicted by Brown actors and actresses, is an act of negative reinforcement of a person’s ethnicity that has been abused in Hollywood. As explained by the

theory of ethnicity, there is a distinct bias in how people treat those who are different from them physically. In the case of Hollywood, minority actors are treated differently as their ethnicity is used to separate themselves from Caucasian actors. As a result, the representation of Asians in Hollywood has been negatively screened as a result of Hollywood's treatment of minority actors. Hollywood's relationship with ethnicity has always been tied along to financial success, and as a result, there has been a lack of diversity among minorities in terms of casting in film and television. The focus on financial success constrains the chance of Asian actors and actresses from holding lead as Hollywood believes that since Asians only make up a small majority of the population, there will not be as many people supporting a movie with a minority actor or actress compared to a Caucasian one. Continuous lack of lead roles for Asian actors and actresses has created a precedent that Hollywood refuses to create a film with a majority of the cast being Asian, which was only recently broken by the 2018 film, *Crazy Rich Asians*. The issue of the exclusion of Asian actors and actresses from landing lead roles creates a dangerous precedent in that minority actors and actresses will never be treated as equal in terms of acting ability compared to their Caucasian counterparts. By comparing the number of lead roles from Caucasian actors and actresses versus Asian actors and actresses, it is clear that there is a bias towards having Caucasian leads in the acting industry.

But, the problems with the lack of diversity are not strictly just for Asian actors and actresses. Minorities make up less than half of the acting industry compared to Caucasians (Wolf). The acting industry needs to be more accepting of allowing minority actors and actresses from landing lead roles or having a more diverse cast. Hollywood's unfair treatment towards minorities creates a negative perception in society that to be an A-list movie star, you need to be Caucasian. Though most people do not strive to be actors, the issues of underrepresentation and

misrepresentation of minorities in Hollywood is an issue that needs to be brought up. Creating an equal playing field for all is important in promoting a multicultural cast that can bring diversity. A person's ethnicity should not be a weakness when determining if they are a worthy actor for a role, instead, it should be used as a potential way of bringing in diversity to casting. Having an equal casting opportunity for all is important in erasing the problems of racial vocalization of Brown actors and actresses, and breaking down institutional barriers which make it less likely for Asian actors and actresses from being offered lead roles. And as a result, it will diminish the misrepresentation of how Asians are portrayed in Hollywood. Multiculturalism will be important in promoting a more diverse and accepting environment for all minority actors and actresses.

Works Cited

- Davé, Shilpa. "Racial Accents, Hollywood Casting, and Asian American Studies." *Cinema Journal*, vol. 56 no. 3, 2017, p. 142-147. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/cj.2017.0030.
- Erigha, Maryann. "Race, Gender, Hollywood: Representation in Cultural Production and Digital Media's Potential for Change." *Sociology Compass*, vol. 9, no. 1, Jan. 2015, pp. 78–89, doi:10.1111/soc4.12237.
- Le, C. N., and Kang, Miliann. "Crazy Rich Asians." *Sociological Forum*, vol. 34, no. 2, June 2019, pp. 524–28, doi:10.1111/socf.12511.
- Lee, Joann. "Asian American Actors in Film, Television and Theater, An Ethnographic Case Study." *Race, Gender & Class*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2001, pp. 176–184. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41675001.
- Minh-Ha T. Pham (2004) The Asian Invasion (of Multiculturalism) in Hollywood, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 32:3, 121-131, DOI: [10.1080/01956051.2004.10662057](https://doi.org/10.1080/01956051.2004.10662057)
- Nishime, Leilani. "Mixed Race Matters: What Emma Stone and Bruno Mars Can Tell Us about the Future of Asian American Media." *Cinema Journal*, vol. 56 no. 3, 2017, p. 148-152. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/cj.2017.0031.
- NYU. "NYU Center for the Study of Asian American Health." *Asian Americans in the U.S.* | *NYU Center for the Study of Asian American Health*, med.nyu.edu/asian-health/about-us/asian-americans-us.
- "Sleeping with the Enemy: Hollywood's Abusive Relationship with race.(The Minority Reporter; Includes Reactions by Jaison Gardner and Shanice Young)." *Georgetown Journal of Law & Modern Critical Race Perspectives*, vol. 1, no. 1, Georgetown University Law Center, Jan. 2009, pp. 41–65.

Sollors, Werner. *Theories of Ethnicity: a Classical Reader*. New York University Press , 1996.

Kuppuswamy, Venkat & Younkin, Peter. (2019). Testing the Theory of Consumer

Discrimination as an Explanation for the Lack of Minority Hiring in Hollywood Films.

Management Science. 10.1287/mnsc.2018.3241.

Vasey, Ruth. "Foreign Parts: Hollywood's Global Distribution and the Representation of

Ethnicity. (Hollywood, Censorship, and American Culture)." *American Quarterly*, vol.

44, no. 4, Johns Hopkins University Press, Dec. 1992, pp. 617–42, doi:10.2307/2713217.

Walzem, Allen. "Asian Masculinity and Contemporary Hollywood Film." *Asian Journal of*

Literature Culture and Society 1.2 (2007): 1-19.

Wolf, Jessica. "UCLA's Hollywood Diversity Report Reveals a Few Bright Spots for Women

and Minorities." UCLA, UCLA, 21 Feb. 2019, [newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/ucla-](https://newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/ucla-hollywood-diversity-report-bright-spots-women-minorities)

[hollywood-diversity-report-bright-spots-women-minorities](https://newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/ucla-hollywood-diversity-report-bright-spots-women-minorities).