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Asian Americans as Leading Men: Reexamining Masculinity in Situational Comedies

As a culturally marginalized and underrepresented group, Asian American men rarely see complex characters that look like them on television. In particular, performing Asian American masculinity in situational comedies traditionally involves asexualizing the character and relegating his role in the narrative to an insignificant supporting one, playing upon his lack of awareness of basic social customs for cheap laughs. For the characters for which this stereotypical caricature does not apply, their races and cultural identities are usually erased or do not figure strongly into their identity as a character, like in the case of Tom Haverford on the NBC show, *Parks and Recreation*. However, within the past year, audiences saw Asian American males move to the forefront of three newly premiered sitcoms: *Selfie*, *Fresh Off the Boat*, and *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*. On the one hand, none of the Asian American males in any of these shows radically defy their traditional stereotypes by fully encompassing hegemonic masculinity on levels that are usually reserved for white males. Nonetheless, the characters on these three shows challenge traditional depictions of Asian American males by turning their assigned status as “the other” into an equivalent counterpart to the female protagonist and by besting their Caucasian male rivals, dismantling the rigid association of hegemonic white masculinity with success in America.

In this analysis, I will examine the ways in which the Asian American male characters on these three shows both challenge and reinforce the stereotypes associated with Asian American

men by comparing and contrasting them to their white male counterparts, both as competitors for the affections of the same female and as competitors in their work lives. First, I will examine the character of Henry Higgs (John Cho) on *Selfie*. The ABC show, *Selfie*, loosely remakes and modernizes the musical, *My Fair Lady*, in which Eliza Dooley, a young pharmaceutical sales representative, asks Henry, a marketing representative at the same company, to help remake her image. Next, I will look at the character of Louis Huang (Randall Park) on *Fresh Off the Boat*. Also airing on ABC, the show is based on chef Eddie Huang's memoir and tells stories from his childhood after his family moves to Orlando from Washington D.C., where his father, Louis, opens a western restaurant. Finally, I will analyze Dong Nguyen (Ki Hong Lee) from the show, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*. A Netflix series originally produced for NBC, this show follows the adventures of Kimmy Schmidt, a girl who is rescued from an underground cult and subsequently decides to live in New York City. Dong is Kimmy's classmate at GED classes and eventually becomes her love interest as well. All three shows present Asian American characters that both complicate the traditional understanding of Asian masculinity and disrupt the binary between offensively stereotypical caricatures and complex yet colorblind depictions.

Not-So-White Knight in Shining Armor

Although he reflects the "model minority" identity in relation to his performance at work, the character of Henry Higgs on *Selfie* redefines Asian masculinity by reappropriating romantic gestures typically assigned to a character with hegemonic masculine traits and by surpassing his white counterpart for the Eliza's affections. In the show's third episode, Henry tries to get Eliza to befriend a co-worker, only for him to eventually realize that he himself does not enjoy socializing with co-workers either. The episode ends with Eliza standing over a trashcan eating

lunch in Henry's office; her reason for doing so is, as she explains earlier in the episode, to help better digest her food. However, she confesses to Henry, "Actually, that's just an excuse I use because, growing up, nobody wanted to sit with me at lunch. Now I'm just kind of used to it," to which Henry responds, "In that case, is this seat taken?" ("A Little"). Not only does Eliza's "cool girl" persona get deconstructed in this scene, but Henry also gets to serve as her chivalrous and romantic opposite. They then both stand over the trashcan eating, and the symmetry of their heights and body positioning reinforces the notion that they are both equals and also both outsiders in their office environment. Other notable instances in the show where Henry eschews the asexual expectations of Asian masculinity are when he rides towards Eliza on a white horse in Episode 5, playing on the "Prince Charming" trope, and when he pulls Eliza towards him and they linger in the sexual tension for a few moments in Episode 6. In contrast to Henry's stoic and professional nature, these moments help transform Henry from merely being the "disapproving sensei" supporting character to becoming a viable and complex love interest for Eliza.

Competing for Eliza's romantic interests is Freddy, another employee at the same company, and he and Henry's battle physically manifests when they compete against each other in a company mud obstacle run in Episode 12. Freddy lays claim to all of the hegemonic masculine qualities, as exemplified in the episode; he sponsors the initial decision to put on this run and even trains Henry for this contest. In the midst of the run, Freddy and Henry get into an argument where Freddy claims, "You're jealous of my youth, my girl, and my hair!" and "You made Eliza question our relationship!" ("Stick in the Mud"). Here, Freddy directly puts his hegemonic masculine qualities in opposition with Henry's identity as an Asian American male. Although Freddy insinuates that his traits are superior, he also acknowledges that Henry was able to disrupt their relationship, which, in turn, implies that hegemonic white masculinity is no

longer assumed to be favored. Ultimately, Freddy and Henry tie for second place in the contest, and at the end of the episode, these self-labeled “frenemies” sit opposite Eliza who ambiguously blows a kiss in their direction, only for them to both think the gesture is directed at them specifically and “catch” it in the air (“Stick in the Mud”). Although Freddy and Henry might have tied both in the contest and for Eliza’s affections in that episode, the implied message that Asian American men can compete with their white rivals and not be automatically subject to rejection expands the perimeters for which masculine traits are deemed romantically valuable.

However, despite the progress Henry’s character makes for the Asian male figure in the romantic realm, he still contends with embodying the “model minority” stereotype at work. In *Selfie*’s second episode, Henry reconnects with his ex-girlfriend after learning how to use Facebook. He asks her, “According to Facebook, everyone is married and having kids. When did that happen?” and she replies, “Probably while you were in the office” (“Un-Tag My Heart”). Henry fulfills the common stereotype associated with Asian Americans, in which they possess the desire to constantly “work hard” to get ahead in their careers and consequently miss out on socializing. As this scene reaffirms, “the model minority stereotype implies academic and occupational success as an absence or rejection of personal and sexual relationships” (Lu and Wong 364). However, Henry’s model minority stereotype is also used in *Selfie* to reflect what Henry values outside of his commitment to work. In Episode 5, he tells an upset Eliza, “I don’t want you to think that I value my job more than I value our friendship because, I swear, it’s a tie” (“Even Hell”). Although the comedic value of the scene comes from the fact that Henry is so invested in his work, his perception of his friendship with Eliza reflects the larger nature of their symbiotic relationship; they are both outsiders who place too much weight in specific aspects of their lives but discover an additional outlet for happiness through their friendship. Although

Henry maintains his identity as the model minority employee throughout the series, his ability to recognize the value of this friendship hints at the complex aspects of his identity outside of work.

The All (Asian) American Family

In contrast to his assertive wife Jessica and his rebellious son Eddie, *Fresh Off the Boat*'s patriarch, Louis, is often emasculated and hindered by the "perpetual foreigner" stereotype with which he is perceived, yet his attempts to neutralize his competitors' privilege force the audience to reevaluate the negative connotations associated with being a foreigner. Although Louis and Jessica are happily married previous to the start of the series, Jessica's ex-boyfriend visiting in Episode 10 reveals Louis's lack of self-awareness. Jessica tells him, "Your love-dar is broken...It took six kayak trips before you realized I liked you," to which he replies, "I just thought you loved rapids" ("Blind Spot"). Although Louis is not asexualized in the same manner as most Asian Americans, he still upholds the prescribed notion that Asian American men lack social awareness and do not actively pursue romantic interests. However, the depiction of Louis and Jessica's marriage also serves to refute notions of inequality within the domestic sphere. After a visit from Jessica's sister and brother-in-law, Louis and Jessica realize how strong their marriage is in comparison. When Louis tells a smiling Jessica, "You realize you're swimming in debt too," she replies, "Yes but we're swimming together" ("Success Perm"). Although Louis's naivety is evident in his romantic history with Jessica, their current relationship as partners in marriage reveals a refreshing equality, in which they both share in the responsibility of raising children and the emotional responsibility of trying to remain financially secure.

Despite the sympathetic nature of Louis believing in the good intentions of others, the manifestation of his optimism results in a correspondingly regressive characterization of Louis as

a prototype of the “model minority” figure. One storyline in Episode 8 revolves around Louis’s hiring of a new employee, Wyatt, to replace a former employee, Mitch, and his subsequent inability to fire him. Eventually, he rehires Mitch and orders him to fire Wyatt since Louis is unable to do so. Louis instructs him, “I leave at 5:30, so do it at 5:35. I want to be on the highway when it’s happening” (“Phillip Goldstein”). Not only is Louis unable to assert his authority as the boss, he fears confrontation to such an extent that he does not want to be present when it happens. Although *Fresh Off the Boat* puts Louis in a position in which he can reverse the hierarchy of racial dominance and affirm his status above his white employee, he does not take the opportunity to do so. The previous episode also reveals how Louis copied his restaurant model from Finnegan, the owner of Golden Saddle restaurants. In a flashback, viewers see that at a franchising meeting, Louis “rolled into town and jacked their manual because he would do whatever it took” (“Showdown”). His thievery reveals, as Peter Chua and Diane Fujino describe, “Asian-American masculinity is about being a good family man who provides for his family and does not ask for government economic assistance” (391). Because he does not have the finances to franchise a Golden Saddle restaurant, he steals the owner’s manual, revealing his own anxieties regarding his abilities to care for his family. Not only does Louis play into conventional tropes about Asian masculinity, he also submits himself as the model minority stereotype as he is unable to reach the standard of success set by his white competitor on his own.

Although Louis never quite fits into the aggressive hegemonic masculinity dictated by American society, he is able to challenge the negative connotations of the “perpetual foreigner” stereotype often conflated with Asian Americans. The “perpetual foreigner” stereotype deals with “Asian Americans [having lived] in the United States since the 1800s, [but] are commonly perceived as foreigners, un-American, or as people who...are therefore ‘unassimilable.’” (Wong

et al. 77). In *Fresh Off the Boat*, Louis demonstrates awareness of such stereotype. In the first episode, he looks to hire a white host, explaining, “Instead of people coming in and seeing a Chinese face...they see a white face and say, ‘Oh hello, white friend. I am comfortable’” (“Pilot”). On the one hand, this scene suggests a tension caused by the perceived inability for Asian and American identities to coexist. However, Louis reclaims and uses this knowledge to his advantage to propel his restaurant to success. In another episode, after Louis reveals the origin of his restaurant concept, he laments his inability to be “visionary,” and Jessica reassures him, “I would choose a good businessman over a visionary any day.” They then retaliate against Finnegan by spray-painting his restaurant billboard with the words, “I am a butt” (“Showdown”). Jessica confirms his inability to take on the quintessentially American characteristics that are seen as the intangible traits that perpetuate success. However, her statement, along with their retaliation at Finnegan, help equalize their systematic disadvantages as perceived foreigners with Finnegan’s status as a privileged male. Louis’s eventual success as a restaurateur alongside Finnegan refutes the ignorance and lack of savvy wiles associated with the “perpetual foreigner.”

Normalized Other and Other-ed Normality

Despite a mixed reaction to Dong’s embodiment of Asian American stereotypes in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, Dong subverts the traditional “other-ing” forced upon Asian males by reversing the other-ing on his love interest, Kimmy, and his rival, Logan Beekman, destabilizing the idea of cultural normativity. In Episode 10, Dong tells Kimmy why they are friends, stating, “We agree on everything, Kimmy, like how it’s so weird that people want to ‘eat local.’” Kimmy then agrees, “Yeah, I don’t want to eat a bird I might know” (“Love Triangle”). Along with the humor, Dong and Kimmy’s compatibility relies on their inherent lack of

awareness regarding pop culture trends and slang terminology. Like Henry and Eliza from *Selfie*, these two are portrayed as both being outsiders in their community. Ultimately, this realization prompts Kimmy to tell Dong she likes him by explaining, “You’re kind, and you’re funny, and both our names mean ‘penis’” (“Love Triangle”). In Dr. Kumiko Nemoto’s article on interracial dating, she explains Asian men’s attraction to white women, saying, “They competed with images of white masculinity by projecting their desires onto white women and by seeking white women’s validation of their manhood” (93). However, this show’s depiction of an interracial relationship refuses to conform to that racial ascension ideology. Equalizing and diminishing the social power both have as outsiders root the progressive nature of their relationship, as neither person depends on each other for social uplift.

Competing for Kimmy’s affections alongside Dong is Logan Beekman, an entitled self-proclaimed “Daddy’s Boy” who first dates Kimmy, and his recognition of Dong as a legitimate competitor for Kimmy reveals the societal anxiety regarding the “yellow peril” fear. When Logan confronts Dong at Kimmy’s birthday party, he tells her that he noticed Dong “staring at her, all excited like a little boy who just picked the lock on his daddy’s Jodhpur armoire,” to which Dong retorts, “Your experiences are not universal!” (“Birthday Party”). This scene destabilizes the invisibility of whiteness by using Dong to slyly remind the audience that whiteness does not equate to normalcy. Dong’s ability to hold his own while Logan attempts to demean him also reflects his inability to be fazed by Logan’s anxiety of “yellow peril,” expressed through Logan’s fear of Dong potentially winning over Kimmy’s affections. In relating yellow peril back to model minority, Tokai University’s Dr. Yuko Kawai succinctly explains, “People of Asian descent become the model minority when they are depicted to do better than other racial minority groups, whereas they become the yellow peril when they are

described to outdo White Americans” (115). The height of his “yellow peril” fear demonstrated by Logan occurs in Episode 10 when immigration officers raid Dong’s place of work looking for him, and Logan confesses to Kimmy, “I’m not ashamed to admit it. I called them...He was in the country illegally. Daddy said I should tell” (“Love Triangle”). In exercising what is perhaps the most historically shameful representation of yellow peril, Logan uses Dong’s status as an immigrant against him for Logan’s own petty gains. However, his failure to actually deport Dong turns into a victory for the Asian male protagonist. Despite Logan’s assertion of his masculinity and white privilege, Kimmy chooses to be with Dong, a decision that suggests a disruption of the association of success with hegemonic masculinity.

Despite the subversive qualities of Dong’s relationship with Kimmy, his occupational role as a student and a Chinese food delivery boy reinforces traditional stereotypes that conflict with the progressive potential of his character. When Kimmy goes to Dong and asks him to be her math tutor, he lets her know, “I barely have time to study at home because I work three shifts” (“Bad at Math”). Like Henry on *Selfie*, Dong’s attitude involving his academics and work similarly embraces the model minority stereotype. He uses the “hard work” reasoning to justify his lack of social availability, and his natural aptitude for math reflects the historical stereotype that Asians excel at math and natural sciences as compensation for their lack of education in English and the arts. However, Dong’s self-awareness of his standing as a minority and a foreigner plays to his advantage, similarly to how Louis uses this knowledge on *Fresh Off the Boat*. When Kimmy says his name too loudly at his place of employment, he shushes her, saying, “I don’t have papers, so at work I go by American name: Richard Pennsylvania” (“Bad at Math”). His strategic decision reflects the “perpetual foreigner” label placed on Asians, but Dong’s ability to recognize this alienation allows him to regain some agency over this label.

Although Dong embodies many stereotypes on this show, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* also takes liberties to ensure those characteristics are appropriated not as qualities to fear, but instead they are used to align audience's empathies with his character.

Conclusion

Although the characters of Henry, Louis, and Dong all demonstrate conforming to stereotypes associated with Asian American males to varying degrees, all three characters ultimately signify progress in reconfiguring and reclaiming Asian masculinity. Most significantly, each show depicts the Asian American male character as one who is both relatable and empathetic. Instead of using stereotypes in a way that positions the Asian American figure as the punch line to a cheap joke, all three shows use the various stereotypes as a way to challenge the heterosexual masculine norm constructed by American society. Future television shows should make the effort to not only expand the number of Asian American males on television but also pursue a more conscious attempt to stay away from the model minority figure that is still characteristic of those men. In addition, the expansion in the number of Asian American men on television should also accompany a bigger variety in range of the sexuality of those figures, especially as a tactic to combat the asexualized image of Asian men. Not only are there no current depictions of homosexual, bisexual, or transgender Asian men in sitcoms, the heterosexual ones mentioned in this analysis were not given the liberty to exercise their sexuality. Nonetheless, these three shows give a newfound visibility to the dimensionality and complexity of Asian American men. Not only are these characters successful in dismantling the valuing of hegemonic masculine characteristics over other types of masculinity, they positively contribute to a growing range of diverse characters on television.

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