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**“It’s not a movie, it’s a movement:”
Analysis of Asian-Americans in American 2018-2019 films**

Patrice A. Oppliger & Siyu Liu

According to director Jon M. Chu, his 2018 film *Crazy Rich Asians* “is not a movie, it’s a movement” (cited in Lee, 2018). The romantic comedy *Crazy Rich Asians* was the first Hollywood film in 25 years to have an all-Asian cast since *The Joy Luck Club* in 1993 and was the highest-grossing romantic comedy in the last decade (Yang, 2019). Three other films featuring Asians and Asian Americans came out in 2018 and 2019 that have also achieved great success. *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before*, the first mainstream teen romance to feature an Asian-American lead, was one of Netflix’s most viewed original films ever (Rohwedder, 2018). The limited release of *The Farewell* on its opening weekend recorded the best average box office take per theater in 2019, beating out the blockbuster *Avengers: Endgame* (D'Alessandro, 2019). According to Netflix, the romantic comedy *Always Be My Maybe* was viewed by 32 million households in its first four weeks of release (Hipes, 2019).

Asian-Americans have been historically alienated and undervalued by White Americans both in society and in media. According to the data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Asian Americans have comprised 5.6% of the U.S. population in 2017 and are the fastest-growing racial group (U. S. Census Bureau, 2018). However, Asian Americans have been historically alienated and undervalued by White Americans both in society and in media. In a study of films released between 2007 and 2016, Asian actors made up only 1% of Hollywood's leading roles, while only 2.4% of directors were Asian. However, the percentage of Asian speaking characters in 2018’s 100 highest-grossing films hit 12-year highs of 8.2 percent (Smith et al., 2019).

In contrast to older Hollywood movies, these films had Asian-American screenwriters and directors. Standpoint goes beyond understanding the circumstances and activities that shape

minority perspectives but “recognize(s) the power relations that produce unequal social positionalities.” *The Farewell* was based on a story from director and screenwriter Lulu Wang’s life, which she told on WBZ radio show *This American Life*, entitled, “What You Don’t Know.” Comedian Ali Wong and comic actor Randall Park co-starred in and co-wrote the script for *Always be My Maybe*, which was based on Wong’s experiences growing up in San Francisco (cited in Bleznak, 2019). *Crazy Rich Asians* and *To All the Boys* were adapted from successful novels written by Kevin Kwan and Jenny Han, respectively.

This paper will explore and reason the changes in the representations of Asian Americans in U.S. films released in 2018 and 2019. According to Bonilla-Silva and Ashe (2014), “Popular cultural texts... strategically contribute to the ongoing social discourse that produces and reproduces dominant social realities about race and how people live and perform race in everyday interactions.” Using critical textual analysis, we explored the meaning embedded in the most recent offerings of films with Asian-American lead characters and how they deviate from past film portrayals. We argue that these movies appear to focus not on how “American” Asian-Americans are but how not “Asian” they are. Each of the films has a significant connection to Asian American novelists, screenwriters, and directors. At the same, time we acknowledge that these films are made for a wider, whiter audience. That they all are classified as comedies and are driven by female charactersⁱ leads us to conclude that the producers are offering a nonthreatening versus of the yellow peril (e.g., *Kung Fu masters* and *dragon ladies*) of past cinema.

Literature Review

We use Said’s latent and manifest Orientalism as a theoretical framework to analyze the content and production of the four films, *Crazy Rich Asians*, *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before*,

Always Be My Maybe, and *The Farewell*. The most prominent academic research to explain how and why the Western culture perceives and depicts Asians is Said's (1978) "Orientalism." Said (1978) used "Orientalism" to analyze how the Western culture perceives and depicts the East as backward and uncivilized, which serves as both "a kind of exoticization and a form of control." He distinguished latent and manifest Orientalism, that the latent one is unconscious and implied positivity underlying Western culture, while the manifest Orientalism can be observed from concrete Western discourse, literature, and history (p. 206).

Racial ideology and stereotyping have long been discussed both in media studies and other social fields as discourses and lived relationships about racial identity (Paek & Shah, 2003; Van Dijk, 2000). Among all the research, Edward Said's Orientalism has kept an enduring seditious and iconoclastic effect since the book published in 1978 (Prakash, 1995). The extraordinary impact of Orientalism, as the historian Prakash (1995) reviewed, lies in its dissolution of geographical boundaries drawn by Western colonial hegemony, and exploring the intellectual and ideological conflagration between the Orient and the Occident in discursive regimes. As a group, Asians have been stereotyped as "model minority" or "yellow peril" for their economic contribution and competition (Kawai, 2005; C. J. Kim, 1999; Shim, 1998). Scholars and critics have argued that residual effect of historical stereotype remains and there have been no significant improvements due to the lack of systemic power within mainstream media production (L. S. Kim, 2004; Ono & Pham, 2009).

Racism against Asians has a long history in the United States. In the mid-1800s, the term "yellow peril" was used in articles and pamphlets to warn white Americans that Asians were threatening their working chances and destroying civilization (Shim, 1998). During the first wave of Asian immigration in the late nineteenth century (after the abolition of slavery), white

workers feared cheap immigrant labor would take their jobs, or at the very least, cause a decrease in their wages. During World War II, Caucasian-Americans distrusted Japanese-Americans (or anyone looking Asian), paranoid they would spy for the Japanese. More recently, Asians have been stereotyped as “model minority” for their economic contribution and competition (Kawai, 2005; C. J. Kim, 1999; Shim, 1998). The term model minority, popularized in the 1960s, could represent some positive qualities of Asian Americans, such as “a superior work ethic, high levels of educational achievement, and a highly refined business and economic sensibility” (Paek & Shah, 2003). Today, yellow peril meets model minority in that some fear that intellectually superior Asian-Americans will take coveted spots at top universities away from white students.

Even though the demographics of Asian Americans have changed and their media portrayals may be different from the previous ones in multiple ways, the latent Orientalism could still remain given the cultural heritages and the current hegemonic West-East relationship (Degabriele, 1996). Clark (1969) presented four stages of media representation for social groups: The first stage, nonrecognition, refers to an absence of minority faces. Even worse, minority characters are often “whitewashed.” Sociologist Lester Andrist defined whitewashing as “the tendency of media to be dominated by white characters, played by white actors, navigating their way through a story that will likely resonate most deeply with white audiences, based on their experiences and worldviews” (cited in La Jeunesse, 2018). Most recent examples of whitewashing of Asian characters include Tilda Swinton (*Doctor Strange*, 2016), Emma Stone (*Aloha*, 2015), and the entire cast of the film *21* (2008). Chong (2016) argued, “most actors and actresses are only sought when international regional accuracy is required, such as when a film is set in China and rarely casted as true Americans.”

The second stage, ridicule, indicates inclusion of stereotypical images only. Characters such as Fu Manchu debuted in 1929. *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu* starred a Swedish-American actor Warner Oland in the title role. *The World of Suzie Wong* in 1960 starred Nancy Kwan as a Chinese prostitute who falls in love with a white American artist. In Clark's (1969) third stage, protectors, minority roles expands to include police officers and detectives. Charlie Chan (who was also played by Warner Oland) was a Chinese-American detective in a series of films in the 1930s and '40s. Lastly, Clark's stage four, respect, refers to media representation of a variety of characters. Bruce Lee, a martial artist who starred in and directed several films before his death in 1973 is often credited with helping to change the way Asians were presented in American films.

While it is important to have Asian actors in roles, Cramer (2016) warned that a color-blind ideology can limit progress for racial and interracial relations. In a study of colorblind casting in African-American writer and producer Shonda Rhimes's shows (e.g., *Grey's Anatomy*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, *Scandal*), Bonilla-Silva and Ashe (2014) argued, "By utilizing Scott's (1993) absence as presence, the creators, writers, and producers situate the characters as race neutral or White and enable the dismissal and forgetting of racism's long history and its impact on the current structures that produce and reproduce racial inequality." The difference with the films in our analysis is that they center on Asian-American storylines from an Asian-American point of view, and are either based on true stories or adapted from Asian authored novels.

There is also a tendency in Hollywood films to cast East Asians interchangeably. For example, Lana Condor who portrays the Korean-American character Lara Jean Song Covey in *TATBILB* is an Asian of Vietnamese descent (Aquino, 2017). The actress who plays her sister

Margot is Chinese and Hawaiian. For Henry Golding, the leading man in *Crazy Rich Asians*, there was a bit of backlash in some corners of the internet (the Malaysian-English actor is biracial, while the character Nick is Chinese-Singaporean). “What is the level of Asian-ness you need to be to be profiled as Asian?” says Golding (cited in Sun & Ford, 2018). Ali Wong, who plays Sasha Tran (*ABMM*), is half Chinese, half Vietnamese. Her parents who in the film are Vietnamese-immigrant are played by Chinese actors Peggy Lu and Raymond Ma. The film *Always Be My Maybe* also “proudly claims [Keanu] Reeves, who has Chinese and Hawaiian heritage, on behalf of the Asian delegation” (Yamato, 2019). According to Yamato, Randall Park exclaimed, “He’s ours!” To many audiences, Reeves, who was born in Beirut Lebanon but grew up in Toronto, often plays “white” or nondescript, ethnically and racially ambiguous characters. Frank H. Wu (2003), author of *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White*, stated that movie audiences “assign people to categories based on images that overpower reality.”

Analysis of APA Portrayal

We found a distinct difference not between the un-hyphenated, European-Americans and Asian-Americans but between Asian-Americans and Asians. American born Chinese who grew up in the United States, as well as immigrants who have spent a significant amount of time in the US, appear to display more independent thinking and American values. Sasha (*ABMM*) is fully American, while her parents are stereotypical in that they own a convenience store and are too cheap to tip. Rachel’s (*CRA*) focus on her own happiness over Nick’s family ties. Rachel struggles whether or not to let Nick go in the end.

There was a significant difference between what are known as FOB (Fresh Off the Boat) and ABC (American Born Chinese) characters - - first and second generations respectively. We were initially planning on using the designation of “first” and “second” generation; however, as

Rumbaut (2004) pointed out, there is no consensus on the meaning and measurement of “generations.” He goes on to argue that there are issues with “lumping” these generational cohorts together, or “splitting” them into distinctive units of analysis.” Factors such as fluency in “the mother tongue” and accents were the most obvious markers. Younger characters displayed more independent thinking and American values. In fact, the premise of *The Farewell* is that Billi, who grew up in the United States, is struggling with her family’s decision not to tell her grandmother that she has cancer. The traditional Chinese or collective view is that the family takes on the burden to protect their loved one.

Much of the conflict of the films is the discussions of which culture is better, American or Chinese. Billi’s mother Jian gets into a debate with Billi’s Chinese cousins who argue that one can get richer faster in China. Jian pushing back, telling stories about how good life is in the United States until her mother-in-law tells her to stop. “That’s enough. No matter what, you can’t criticize China. Don’t forget, you’re still Chinese.” Billi’s father Haiyan retorts, “Technically, we’re American...I mean, we have American passports” much to his mother’s displeasure. Haiyan’s brother, who lives in Japan, counters, “I’ll always be Chinese. No matter where I live or what passport I hold.”

In *TATBILB*, the Asian-American characters were separated from their Asian heritage at an early age. Lara Jean and her two sisters Margot and Kitty are daughters of a Korean-American mother, who passed away when the girls were young, and a Caucasian father, Dr. Covey. A medical doctor, the father can afford to raise his family in an upper-middle class neighborhood (read white). The girls were not only separated from their culture because of their mother’s absence but geographically. They live in a white neighborhood far from even the town’s Korean market. Other than Yakult yogurt drink and an occasional Korean beauty mask or mention of a

Korean holiday, there are few deliberate Asian markers. Dr. Covey attempts to keep the girls linked to their Korean roots – but not Korean-American. He makes the Lara Jean and Kitty wear hanbok, a traditional Korean dress to the girls’ maternal grandparents’ house for Korean New Year. Dr. Covey, Lara Jean, and Kitty practice deep bowing to their elders. In the novel, the girls had so little knowledge of the tradition they had to watch a YouTube video to see how to wear them. Lara Jean’s cousins, who are full Korean-American, are even less likely than the sisters to follow the Korean traditions.

While they somewhat represent what it means to be Asian-American, these films are relatively free of racism. The only reference in the film *TATBILB* includes a scene showing the stereotypical Asian male Long Duck Dong character in the 1984 film *Sixteen Candles*. The following is an exchange between Lara Jean’s white boyfriend and the girls:

Peter: I’m sorry, isn’t this character, Long Dong Duck like, kinda racist?

Lara Jean: Not “kind of.” Extremely racist.

Peter: So why do you like this movie?

Kitty: Why are you even asking that question? Hello, Jake Ryan!

The offense of the racist character is overruled by the dreaminess of the white lead character, Jake. There were two additional brief mentions of racism that were in the follow up novel *To All the Boys: PS, I Still Love You* but were purposely left out of the film. In the book, Han (2015) wrote the following in Lara Jean’s voice, “Hanging around the retirement home, I’ve gotten used to the vaguely racist things old people say. At least Stormy didn’t use the word ‘Oriental’ anymore” (p. 100). Secondly, there was an issue regarding Lara Jean’s choices of Halloween costumes in the novel, although the movie leaves it out. She limits herself to dressing up only as

Asian characters because otherwise everyone incorrectly guesses who she is supposed to be.

Han, writing in Lara Jean's voice stated:

There are very limited options for Asian girls on Halloween. Like one year I went as Velma from Scooby-doo, but people just kept asking me if I was a manga character. I even wore a wig! So now I'm committed to dressing up as Asian characters exclusively... This year I'm going as Cho Chang from Harry Potter... I'm not going to win any contests, but at least people will know what I am. I wish I never have to answer a *What are you?* question ever again. (Han, 2017, p. 225)

Of all the films, *Always Be My Maybe* most deliberately and comically takes on stereotypes. Sasha makes jokes about white people liking rice paper, Asians using handicap parking when they clearly do not need it, and Marcus's Asian girlfriend having dreadlocks. The main character Marcus (*ABMM*) fronts a local band named "Hello Peril," a not so subtle reference to the "yellow peril" moniker. By playing with the derogatory label and displaying band shirts with the word "Hello" in yellow print, he is defusing and challenging latent Orientalism. Other cultural markers or stereotypes were present in most of the film in terms of parenting, language, and food.

Parenting markers. A theme used to distinguish Asian culture from American-Asian culture was distinct differences in parenting. Asian women have a reputation as "tiger moms," a form of strict parenting where children are pushed to succeed in music and academically. Amy Chua (2011), a Yale University law professor, sparked controversy in her book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. Lee (2018) defined "tiger mother" as one who demands academic success over all else. Chua (2011) argued that Chinese mothers are superior to Western mothers.

There was a significant difference between Nick's mother Eleanor and Rachel's mother Kerry (*CRA*). Eleanor directly addressed the tiger mom trope, admitting to interfering in her son's life. She defends Chinese parents. She "gave" her only child to her mother-in-law to raise. Rachel shows compassion for that: "I don't want him to lose his mother again." She scolds Rachel for being ambitious and following her passion, something which Rachel's mother has nurtured in her. She tells Rachel that she will never be good enough for her son. When Rachel refuses Nick's proposal, she tells Eleanor that she did not want Nick to lose his mother again, referencing the family history where Nick was sent to live with his Grandmother so he would be the favorite and inherit the family fortune. Rachel sacrifices her happiness (an American value) and earns the respect of Eleanor because she gave up Nick (a Chinese value). When Eleanor goes to see Nick afterward, she tilts her head in sympathy when she sees his sad face. At the engagement party, Eleanor nods at Rachel and slightly smiles. In the book, the mother doesn't accept them: a very Hollywood ending.

Billi's mother is disappointed in Billi's lack of success in *The Farewell*. However, there is little mention of how she was raised. She gets along better – has fewer fights - and appears closer to her father. Her mother talks about others perceive her as cold because she does not show her emotion, for example, she did not cry at her father's funeral.

Lara Jean (*TATBILB*) lost her mother in the time before the film's storytelling begins. Laura Jean's white father has taken a significant role in his daughter's lives – keeping their mother's memory and culture alive. In *ABMM*, Sasha laments that she had to raise herself because her mother was always working at the family store. She had a very loving relationship with Marcus's mother Judy, who patiently taught her how to cook Korean food.

Language markers. Obvious markers of Asianness in the films are accents and fluency in “the mother tongue.” According to (Lieberson, Dalto, and Johnston (1975), “The United States has been multilingual from its beginnings, but was established early on as a society in which one language, English, occupies a hegemonic position and others must struggle to persist.” Each generation appears to lose fluency. Asians appear to “Anglicization” as the same rate as it did for Europeans (Alba, Logan, Lutz, & Stults, 2002). Descendants of Spanish speakers is slower, likely because of the proximity to the border with Mexico.

Billi is often criticized for her poor Mandarin (*The Farewell*). When she wants to stay in China to look after her dying grandmother, her mother tells her she can be no good for her grandmother because of her lack of fluency. The Song Sisters (*TATBILB*) do not know Korean and were never taught even when their mother was alive. In *ABMM*, Sasha, who is Vietnamese, points out that the servers and cooks at the restaurant they go to are rude because they never learned Cantonese. Marcus on the other hand, learns some Cantonese phrases, in his words to get “better service” and to show respect to the restaurant workers.

In *Crazy Rich Asians*, Rachel’s mother tries to explain to her daughter that although she looks Asian and speaks fluent Mandarin, her mind and heart are American. (In the book she speaks perfect Mandarin but the actor playing her, Constance Wu, does not. The book also allows for more character development so perhaps movie Rachel needs to not speak perfectly to differentiate her from the Singapore Chinese). Nick’s mother, on the other hand, worries that he is becoming too “American,” in his accent and therefore attitudes. He and many of the younger characters have British or Australian accents to mark their English language educations.

Food markers. The most common device used in all five films to bridge the generations and keep Asian traditions alive in America is through food. *The Farewell’s* director Lulu Wang

said, “For Chinese families like Billi’s — and mine — food is the crux around which we’re oriented” (cited in Zhang, 2019). The cultural symbolism of material things such as food also makes it easy to connect with American audiences. This cultural symbolism is easy for American audiences to understand because it is tangible and most people are familiar with Chinese restaurants. For screenwriters and directors, food connections are easy to portray on screen in a short amount of time with little effort.

In *Always Be My Maybe*, Sasha is a professional chef who specializes in fusion cuisine — a metaphor for a Vietnamese-American who has a strong connection with the Korean family next door. She is shown as a twelve-year-old making her own dinner, which consisted of rice and Spam, as her parents are working late at the store. She learns to cook from Marcus’ Korean mother Judy. She creates a strong bond with Judy, which ultimately causes a rift between her and Marcus when Judy dies. After Sasha’s success as a celebrity chef, Marcus pushes back telling her that Asian food should not be “elevated,” it should be “authentic.” Sasha eventually returns to more traditional or “authentic” food in the end, cooking recipes she learned from Judy.

Crazy Rich Asians spends a significant amount of screen time focusing on Singapore’s street food and extravagant dinners. Nick’s family is shown making dumpling together so the tradition will not be lost, even though Astrid is resisting. In *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before*, Lara Jean’s Caucasian father cooks Korean food to keep the spirit of his daughter’s Korean-American mother alive, who passed away when the girls were young. *TATBILB*’s Lara Jean drinks Yakult, a Japanese yogurt drink. There was even a dramatic increase in sales of Yakult shortly after Netflix released *TATBILB* (Yamatos, 2020). To distinguish how removed they were from Korean culture, the Korean market is on the other side of town from Lara Jean’s home.

Conclusion

Chu's declaration that his 2018 film *Crazy Rich Asians* "is not a movie, it's a movement" (cited in Lee, 2018) can be read two ways: box office popularity or about rethinking Asian-American roles/portrayals. The #GoldOpen movement encourages Asian-Americans to buy movie tickets for films' opening weekends since the movie industry is extremely sensitive to initial box office receipts. Conventional wisdom purports, if a type of film does well, there will be to come. According to Isabella Chua (2019), "there is a steadily growing appetite for more diversity in storytelling, in terms of plot, characters, and setting." When so few films are available, there is significant pressure to do well. Wong and Park shared that they did not want their movie "to be *the* Asian American rom-com, just *an* Asian American rom-com" (Whitney, 2019). There is also push back when it comes to casting. Kevin Kwan optioned his book *Crazy Rich Asians* for \$1 so he could keep it Asian (Sun & Ford, 2018). Similarly, Jenny Han, author of the *To All the Boys* book series, turned down movie options for producers who wanted the main character Lara Jean to be Caucasian.

Although movie producers have not been able to completely avoid stereotypes, they have made inroads to redefine the way Asian-Americans are represented in film. According to Oh (2011), "The final stage of ethnic emergence is a negotiation of a new bicultural identity as both Asian and American." Kiang (2020) described Asian stereotype as "the violin-playing/whiz-kid/spelling bee champion." The stereotype of Asian-Americans as being the "model minority" is challenged and upheld at the same time in these films. Lara Jean (*TATBILB*) is a bad driver but has a messy room. Nick (*CRA*) is hot and Billie (*The Farewell*) is a hot mess, dispelling the notion that Asian men are not masculine and all Asians are economically successful. In addition,

Shen (2019) points out Marcus in *ABMM* is an underachiever, which actually signifies progress in representing Asians in positive ways.

The four examples analyzed in this paper were very successful films. One cannot overlook the factor present in all the films, is that they are all classified as comedies, which may be seen as non-threatening, light entertainment. Film making present challenges of avoiding stereotypes, while preserving the Asian culture of the characters.

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ⁱ It could be argued that Randall Park's character Marcus in *ABMM* shares the lead role but the film is based on the real life of Ali Wong, who plays Sasha.