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# The changing face of the “Yellow Peril” — representations of Asians and Asian Americans in the context of the “streaming revolution” in the United States

**Abstract:** The aim of this article is a critical analysis of the changing landscape of American streaming and post-network television content offer in the context of Asians’ and Asian Americans’ representations. The focus of this analysis is primarily on the stereotypes — the mechanisms behind their construction and deconstruction, and their role in the shaping of the popular image of Asians and Asian Americans. The secondary goal is the attempt to show how the culturally constructed Other is constantly present in the common imagination of the TV and cinema audience, and how this construct influences production companies, audiences, and showrunners in the USA. The question of the postulated “change” in the representation of Asian and Asian Americans, and their visibility remains open for further debate. However, I have attempted to restrict it to the model example of two series over the past twenty years.

**Keywords:** television, streaming revolution, Asians, United States, representation, stereotypes, orientalism

Asian Americans and Asians in general occupy an interesting and difficult to describe position in contemporary American culture. As an ethnic, cultural and language minority, Asians have been heavily affected by negative stereotypes about them, so much so that until recently both Asians and Asian Americans have been either absent from mainstream media and entertainment or by default misrepresented and marginalised. After a period of heavy stereotyping in popular culture (pre-Second World War) came a long-lasting and peculiar lack of representation, which has only recently begun to change. This situation reflects a general attitude towards the Orient, understood here in classic terms as a certain construct, a set of western beliefs about an abstract, non-existent, mythical East.<sup>1</sup> Asians are archetypal others, an element of

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<sup>1</sup> E. Said, *Orientalism*, London 1995, pp. 1–2.

a popular culture mythology. In recent years however, the situation of all minorities' visible in American media has begun to change. There are two contributing factors: increased tensions in entertainment and film industries due to minority groups' struggle for more visibility, and the rise of new media — particularly, streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon, Hulu etc. This article aims at analysing the changing situation of Asian Americans and Asians in mainstream American television and online productions in the context of the ongoing so-called streaming revolution. The most important questions pertain to stereotypes, changing visibility and the construction of a cultural Other as a complicated process of constant negation, particularly visible in entertainment media. In this paper, I have attempted to examine the historical continuity of the stereotypical representations of Asians and Asian Americans in entertainment media throughout history, and focus on the noticeable change that occurred due to the advent of post-network television and streaming services. As a theoretical framework, I have employed elements of the concept of orientalism as proposed and discussed by Edward Said in his 1978 classic work. Further, to understand the significance and enduring nature of stereotypes about Asians and Asian Americans I have used certain elements of George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory. By necessity I limited my analysis to East Asians, mainly the Chinese and Japanese, as the term "Yellow Peril" applied exclusively to them. In order to show the aforementioned change, I have selected two representative examples: *All-American Girl* (ABC, 1994–1995), and *Fresh Off the Boat* (ABC, 2015–2020).

## The origins of the "Yellow Peril"

The term "Yellow Peril" was first used by Kaiser Wilhelm II of the German Empire to encourage expansion and further his colonial agenda in East Asia.<sup>2</sup> The original context of its usage was entirely political — it served as a kind of a propagandist gimmick, used to substantiate German, British and Russian intervention in the case of the Shimonoseki peace agreement (1895) between Imperial Japan and China. The Kaiser wanted to justify this move and his ambition to take over all Japanese-occupied territories in mainland China, therefore based on the advice from his leading Asian affairs expert Max von Brandt, he began to advance a largely unfounded scenario about the growing "Yellow Peril" (*die Gelbe Gefahr*). The foundation of this view was the concept of an immediate clash between eastern and western civilisation.<sup>3</sup> In subsequent years, he used the term extensively in his speeches and rallies, particularly during the Boxer Rebellion (1899–

<sup>2</sup> G.G. Rupert, *The Yellow Peril or, the Orient versus the Occident*, Choctaw 1911, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> A. Iikura, "The 'Yellow Peril' and its influence on German–Japanese relations", [in:] *Japanese–German Relations, 1895–1945: War, Diplomacy and Public Opinion*, eds. Ch.W. Spang, W. Rolf-Harald, London 2006, pp. 80–97.

1901), when German troops were again involved in the “Allied” intervention in Beijing. The turbulent nature of the early decades of the 20th century, marked by the rising power and ambition of the Japanese Empire, resulted in a heightened sense of impending danger growing in Asia. After the Russo-Japanese War and the humiliating defeat Russians suffered in the battle of Tsushima (1905), anti-Asian rhetoric found a fertile ground in The Russian Empire, as well as Great Britain and Germany. At the same time the United States was relatively uninvolved in the colonial race in Asia. Even though the US participated in the allied intervention in Beijing (during the Boxer Rebellion) its attitude towards expansion in Asia remained less aggressive than that of the European Powers and during the presidency of T. Roosevelt, W.H. Taft and W. Wilson, US policy in Asia could be described as cautious and restrained. However, both the phrase “Yellow Peril” and the surrounding discourse and rhetoric was quickly adopted by the American press.<sup>4</sup> It was very enticing as a tool for populist political rhetoric, as it appealed to all groups of white people calling for racial unity in the face of a common threat of the non-white “Other”.

Here the term Other is used in accordance with the concept of Edward Said’s orientalism. The Orient is a certain discourse the West developed to represent the generalised “East”. According to him, it is a construct of literary and artistic imagination and an important part of Western culture, art and philosophy. The Other in orientalism is a sublimation and reflection of certain beliefs about the East represented as irrational, superstitious, immoral, weak, feminised etc., which are contrasted with the strong, masculine, rational, and moral West.<sup>5</sup> The construct of the Otherness of The East helped to define Western culture, as it set out a clear line between what is “Western” and “Eastern” in culture.<sup>6</sup> The cultural inequality that is inherently embedded in that mode of thinking served as a primary source of cultural stereotypes — positioning the Other as incomprehensible, intellectually weaker and fundamentally inferior. It provided both a justification and the tools to extrapolate certain traits and use them to construct the oriental Other as an easily identifiable creature, which can be kept at a safe distance, or subjugated. However, Said argues that there is a fundamental difference between the European and American oriental mode of thinking. While in Europe the discourse of orientalism has a very long cultural and political tradition that played an important part in the establishment of the European colonial empires,<sup>7</sup> the imperialistic, colonial aspect of the oriental discourse was largely absent from the American version of it. Instead, the American orientalism is more internalised and centred on the ethnic and

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<sup>4</sup> N.T. Saito, “Model minority, Yellow Peril: Functions of ‘foreignness’ in the construction of Asian American legal identity”, *Asian Law Journal* 71, 1997, no 4, p. 71.

<sup>5</sup> E. Said, op. cit., pp. 2–3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 65–67.

<sup>7</sup> M.V. Nayak, Ch. Malon, “American orientalism and American exceptionalism”, *International Studies Review* 11, 2009, no 2, pp. 253–276.

cultural “fault lines” within the multi-cultural American society itself, thus it was reflected more in the legal and media discourses rather than official state policy. In fact, media play a key role in the process of formation and perpetuation of stereotypes and ideologies. According to Stuart Hall, ideologies and stereotypes are not results of conscious choices but a long process of socialisation and individual indoctrination in which media play a key role. To quote Hall:

They pre-date individuals, and form part of the determinate social formations and conditions in which individuals are born [...] the media are not only a powerful source of ideas about race. They are also one place where these ideas are articulated, worked on, transformed and elaborated.<sup>8</sup>

The American notion of orientalism is more closely related to ideological racism rather than literary and artistic discourses. Therefore, from the beginning the primary conduits for its perpetuation and proliferation were the media, particularly the press.

## Asians in America

Asian migrant workers (predominantly Chinese) began to arrive in significant numbers during the gold rushes and westward expansion of the United States in the 19th century. At that time, American society was highly segregated and racially stratified so that attitudes towards migrants from different parts of Asia were immediately determined by racial/ethnic identification and prejudice. This type of social structure, centred around a mono-ethnic core of a privileged white population, and surrounding poorer and ethnically different groups, resulted in a quick and easy adoption of the discourse of the cultural Other.<sup>9</sup> Around the same time a plethora of identifiably alien (and as so prone to being “otherised”), but not racially different migrant groups like: the Irish, Poles, Italians, Russians, Jews or Germans began arriving in significant numbers. They had the opportunity to blend with the majority (to a degree) or to form enclaves that were ethnically and culturally, but not racially different from the majority. This situation quickly resulted in a stigmatisation and proliferation of racial rhetoric against those who were indeed racially different. Unfortunately, the US laws reinforced and to a degree reflected this complicated social situation. Since gaining independence, The United States’ laws restricted naturalised citizenship to “white” ethnicity — not precisely defined, but commonly recognisable. In the 1870s aftermath of the American Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation (1862) the citizenship provisions were broadened to include persons of “African nativity and descent”.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> S. Hall, *Racist Ideologies and the Media. Media Studies: A Reader*, New York 2000, p. 272.

<sup>9</sup> R.G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*, Philadelphia 1999, pp. 15–16.

<sup>10</sup> N.T. Saito, op. cit., p. 78.

This is a striking example of the notion of Asian “otherness” in action — Asians were simply ignored as a minority, and not recognised under the law. The situation did not change much even after the signing of the Burlingame Treaty between the United States and Qing China in 1868, which stipulated: “Chinese citizens in the United States, shall enjoy the same privileges, immunities, and exemptions in respect to travel or residence, as may there be enjoyed by the citizens or subjects of the most favoured nation”.<sup>11</sup> In reality the situation of all Asians (or people of Mongolian race as they were designated in the law) did not change, and Asians suffered persecution, eviction and very often physical violence. There were a number of laws passed in the second half of the 19th century that further sanctioned and deepened the difficult position of Asians and Asian Americans: The Page Act of 1875, The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and The Geary Act of 1892. Particularly important was The Chinese Exclusion Act, which replaced the Burlingame Treaty (1868).<sup>12</sup> After The Emancipation Proclamation, Asian immigrants (mainly Chinese men) provided a much needed, cheap alternative to slave labour, contenting themselves with very low wages and poor working conditions. White workers often viewed this as threatening, because in a rapidly industrialising economy they could not compete with them. This economic threat to “white male domination” was a source of many Anti-Asian sentiments and fertile ground for populism.<sup>13</sup> The case of “yellow man” taking jobs and land from white Americans was an important element of the nationalist and right-wing rhetoric of the latter half of the 19th century. It is worth noting that Asian contributions to the development of the United States, particularly railroads, remained largely unnoticed. In 1924, The Immigration Act reduced the number of Asian immigrants coming into the United States almost to zero. Subsequently the public interest in and political sensitivity of the Asian American issue decreased as well.

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the popular press and pulp literature used the “yellow peril” construct both as a figure of speech and a metaphor for the impending threat of the “yellow men” and “Asian hordes”. In popular discourse the stereotype of an Asian began to take a more standardised form. A stereotypical “yellow” man was predominantly male (mostly due to the scarcity of Asian women in America at the time), small in posture, with comically exaggerated features, unable to speak proper English and in cultural terms utterly incomprehensible for a “white” person. A key element in this process was the formation of poor and crowded Asian (mainly Chinese) enclaves within American cities, as the material

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<sup>11</sup> J. Schrecker, “‘For the equality of men — for the equality of nations’: Anson Burlingame and China’s first embassy to the United States, 1868”, *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 17, 2010, no 1, p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> L. Salyer, *Chew Heong v. United States: Chinese Exclusion and the Federal Courts*, Federal Judicial Center Federal Judicial History Office, Washington 2016, pp. 31–32.

<sup>13</sup> R.G. Lee, op. cit., p. 35.

conditions very often influence the development of perceptions and stereotypes.<sup>14</sup> Press and fiction often associated “Chinatowns” with crime, drugs, prostitution, which reflected the “otherness” of Asians, viewed as uncivilised, immoral and prone to crime. This also relates to a broader belief characteristic for western orientalism, based on the notion of the legal and orderly nature of Western civilisation contradicting hermetic, superstitious and authoritarian East.<sup>15</sup> Already at this point the stereotypes about Asians became interestingly sexually polarised; with Asian men being completely asexual, weak and possibly (but unlikely), a threat to white women (as they desired them constantly in secret), but incapable of gaining any favours with them. At the same time, Asian women were increasingly sexualised to the point when they transformed into an archetypal oriental courtesan. Said explains this phenomenon in his *Orientalism* as a part of the strategies of colonial subjugation. Asian women were viewed as pronged towards prostitution and completely amoral. Oriental sex became a commodity in popular culture,<sup>16</sup> this reflects the subconscious fear of the “other” becoming a sexual threat — Asian males could not compete with Whites, who in turn were entitled to the possession of Asian women. According to Said in the discourse of Orientalism, sexuality was an element of racial and colonial domination and the “sexually subservient” position of Asian women, providing pleasure for and amusement of white colonisers was the source of many stereotypes. Said writes about “eroticised” sex as a key element of the overall “eroticised” oriental Other.<sup>17</sup>

### The discourse of the “Yellow Peril” and stereotypes about Asians and Asian Americans

The discourse of the “Yellow Peril” gave rise to many durable stereotypes about Asians which formed a core “matrix” for the construction of Asians and Asian American representations in media, particularly television and film. The formation of stereotypes usually involves a pattern of certain overgeneralised assumptions about a particular group of “others” that becomes (typically through language) a habitual, simplified mode of thinking about a certain group or ethni-

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<sup>14</sup> F.S. Chyng, “Ling Woo in historical context, the new face of Asian American stereotypes on television”, [in:] *Gender, Race and Class in Media: A Text-Reader*, eds. G. Dines, J.M. Humez, Thousand Oaks 2003, p. 657.

<sup>15</sup> D. Shim, “From Yellow Peril through model minority to renewed Yellow Peril”, *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 22, 1998, no 4, p. 388.

<sup>16</sup> E. Said, op. cit., p. 190.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

city.<sup>18</sup> This cognitive approach allows for theorising about the way in which the stereotypes in question were formed, but more importantly how they survived for so long and even manage to reinvent it in many new forms. In 1920, the common stereotypes about "Chinamen" were incorporated into the entertainment media narratives — a term I am using consciously as opposed to the "factual media", in accordance with John Corner's distinction between immediate and objective reaction of the audience to factual media representation, and indirect, varied reaction to "fictional media".<sup>19</sup> The narratives in film and later radio and television were — by necessity — filled with stereotypes, as they had to fit into a certain mode of audience responsiveness — they had to be adaptable and accessible, easily identifiable, and as such, also stereotypical. In the 1920s and 1930s there was a string of characters that established the most common types of stereotypical representations of Asians, perhaps the most famous of which was the Dr Fu Manchu character (1930) a devious, scheming individual, constantly plotting against virtuous white men. In classical Saidian terms Dr Fu Manchu was a narrative construct representing the "Asian civilisation" by definition morally, technically and socially inferior, being a threat to the "civilised, white West".<sup>20</sup> The representations of Asian women can generally be summarised using two categories: "dragon ladies" and "courtesans". "Dragon ladies" were attractive but domineering and subversive, constantly a threat to white men, and occupying the position of "exotic imaginative projection of sexual desire".<sup>21</sup> They are best exemplified by characters often played by early Hollywood actress Anna May Wong, perhaps most notably in the 1930 movie *Daughter of The Dragon*. The "courtesans" were usually sexualised and objectified to the point when "white men" could not resist them; they were a threat to the archetype of western, Christian moral virtues. Perhaps the best-known example of the sexualised depictions of Asian women in early 20th-century popular culture is Wong's character Hui Fei in the 1932 movie *Shanghai Express*. Representations like those mentioned above served as a template for enduring narrative types of characters, reproduced in countless iteration over subsequent decades. The narrative and visual stereotypes invented in the popular press and entertainment media became the accepted standardised way of structuring the common image of an Asian as the Other.<sup>22</sup> It is important to notice, that despite the above-mentioned examples, the 1920s and 1930s saw many in-

<sup>18</sup> R.S. Chou, J.R. Feagin, *Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism*, Boulder 2008, p. 43.

<sup>19</sup> J. Corner, "Meaning, genre, and context: The problematics of 'public knowledge' in the new audience studies", [in:] *Mass Media and Society*, eds. J. Curran, M. Gurevich, London 1991, pp. 272–273.

<sup>20</sup> R.S. Chou, J.R. Feagin, op. cit., p. 105.

<sup>21</sup> M. Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, Oxford, 1951, [after:] D. Shim, op. cit., p. 389.

<sup>22</sup> Q. Zhang, "Asian Americans beyond the model minority stereotype: The nerdy and the left out", *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 3, 2010, no 1, pp. 20–37.

stances of so-called “whitewashing” and the overall presence of Asians and Asian Americans on-screen was minimal, particularly in leading roles. The practice of “whitewashing” refers to a casting practice in the film industry in which white actors are cast in non-white roles.<sup>23</sup> Some historians argue that this is directly reminiscent of similar practices in classical theatre, which is closely related to another practice called “yellowface”<sup>24</sup> — characteristic, exaggerated makeup which marked Asian characters in 18th and 19th century theatre.<sup>25</sup> The practice of “yellowface” was also present in silent cinema and endured well into the 20th century, with a good example being Mickey Rooney’s Mr. Yunioshi in the 1961 film *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, the Chung King character played by Christopher Lee in the 1961 film *Terror of the Tongs*, Peter Sellers in 1980 *The Fiendish Plot of Dr. Fu Manchu*, or Max von Sydow as Emperor Ming in the 1980 release, *Flash Gordon*. Regardless of the often quoted “comical” or “satirical” element embedded in many of the later instances of “yellowface” employment in movies, some scholars argue that this practice was, and continues to be very damaging. Robert G. Lee writes that:

Yellowface marks the Asian body as unmistakably Oriental, [...] exaggerates “racial” features that have been designated “Oriental”.<sup>26</sup> The sharp contrast between the visual construct of a “yellowface” and natural features serves as a tool of a “visual racial violence” which makes Asians forcefully invisible.<sup>27</sup>

According to Schmidt “yellowface” is both a racial and radicalising practice — it serves to mark the actor as a racial Other, to symbolically alienate the character. The performance involving the “yellowface” practice is therefore perceived and judged according to common knowledge of racial characteristics — most often in the form of common stereotypes.<sup>28</sup>

The situation of both Asian American communities and Asian representations in popular culture changed significantly during the Second World War. American media discourse focused on two major issues: the enemy — Japan, and the ally — China. On the one hand the war caused a wave of stigmatising, negative attitudes towards the Japanese and Japanese-Americans, which was further reinforced by the US government’s policy. On the other hand, however, the attitudes towards the Chinese changed for the better and in many instances China’s stubborn, valiant resistance against the Japanese invasion was emphasised in media and popular

<sup>23</sup> K. Aumer et al., “Assessing racial preferences in movies: The impact of mere-exposure and social identity theory”, *Psychology* 8, 2017, pp. 1315–1316.

<sup>24</sup> It is similar to “blackface”, another equally (or possibly more) prevalent practice of racial “otherisation”, omnipresent in pre-WW2 popular culture.

<sup>25</sup> B.A. Schmidt, *Visualizing Orientalness: Chinese Immigration and Race in U.S. Motion Pictures, 1910s–1930s*, Köln 2015, p. 41.

<sup>26</sup> R.G. Lee, op. cit., pp. 2–3.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> B.A. Schmidt, op. cit., p. 43.

discourse as a positive symbol. The Chinese became allies against a common foe and began to play an important role in wartime entertainment and propaganda.<sup>29</sup> The situation changed again after the war, when Japan was subjugated and adopted a western democratic system of government, becoming an important ally of the United States in Asia. At the same time communists won the civil war in China, and proclaimed a new country — the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Cold war rhetoric influenced the popular discourse enormously in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1952, immigrants of Japanese birth/ancestry were finally allowed to become US citizens, and after the end of the American occupation of Japan (1945–1952), Japanese culture was increasingly becoming a “commodity” in popular culture and an archetype of the “exotic”, “mysterious” East, very needed in the time of early television. This was of course a clear reproduction of Said’s notion of the mythologised and exotic East. Asians and Asian Americans were not openly stigmatised; however, they were mostly ignored, and only appeared sporadically, as supporting characters, often used for comic relief. Naturally most of these representations reinforced the already well-established narrative stereotypes. It is worth mentioning that there were virtually no “leading” Asian men or women in either movies or television, and the practice of “whitewashing” was still commonplace. As the situation of African American visibility in media began to change in the late 1960s and 1970s, it remained largely stagnant when it came to Asians and Asian Americans. The noticeable exceptions were certain subgenres of action movies and TV productions involving yet another, enduring type of stereotyped characters — the Kung-fu/Karate masters.<sup>30</sup> However, besides the success of new stars such as Hong Kong American star Bruce Lee, who dominated the genre in the early 1970s, there were also notable cases of whitewashing, for example the popular ABC series *Kung-Fu* (1972–1975) starring David Carradine, even though the role was intended for Bruce Lee.

The representations of Asian Americans as a minority became politically important during the 1960s, a time of rising racial tensions and impending political debate about African American rights. The result of these changing social, political, and most importantly economic circumstances was the development of a new cluster of stereotypes about Asians and Asian Americans. The so-called “model minority” discourse emerged as a political tool during the Civil Rights Movement — conservative politicians (mainly Republicans) used the Asian American minority as a model example of the possibility for success in America in order to diminish the black community’s arguments, and present their purported ineptitude and lack of certain traits as largely responsible for their own lowered

<sup>29</sup> D. Shim, *op. cit.*, p. 392.

<sup>30</sup> J. Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture*, Oxford 2011, p. 74.

economic, political and social circumstances.<sup>31</sup> Within the “model minority” rhetoric, Asians (the term was completely generalised, there was no distinction between Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans and other Asian ethnicities) were portrayed as hardworking, industrious, thrifty, family-oriented, and disciplined to the extreme.<sup>32</sup> The problem here is that while the “model minority” stereotype is arguably more positive than “Yellow Peril”, it is still a minority model cultivating the cultural otherness of Asians. Many scholars argue that the seemingly positive features are indeed deceptive, and exist as a different iteration of the same threat of “Asian domination and competitiveness”.<sup>33</sup> The racial framework of the “model minority” discourse puts Asians and Asian Americans in a strange position — being superior to other minorities (and even the majority) in terms of economy and education, but always framed from the white majority’s point of view. While the pop-cultural visibility of Asians remained low through the 1970s and 1980s, the emerging sci-fi and fantasy blockbuster trend retained both genres’ propensity for stereotyping Asian or Asian-inspired characters towards the latter half of the 1980s — most notably in the *Star Trek* series.

### Asian Americans in mainstream television — the case of *All-American Girl*

It was not until the 1990s, that a first all-Asian cast arrived on mainstream television. In 1994 ABC’s *All-American Girl* was the first family sitcom with a predominantly Asian leading cast. The show was supposed to focus on an ordinary Asian American (Korean American to be specific). The leading actress was the well-known comedian Margaret Cho, who played the character of Margaret Kim; a typical, young Asian American woman, who rebels against her conservative and overbearing family. The history of this production is a model example of the confusion and indecisiveness that defines Asian American representations in entertainment media. Shortly after shooting began, the producers decided that Margaret Cho is too “American” and required an “Asian consultant” in order to teach her how to show more “Asian traits”, which of course meant traits that reflected the stereotypical, exaggerated features expected by the audience.<sup>34</sup> Over the course of several episodes more and more white actors were hired, because the producers feared the series would not be appealing to a wider audience. The main plot point was the stereotypical representation of Asian Americans based on the motive of a clash between Americanised protagonist and the “exotic other” that is her family,

<sup>31</sup> D. Shim, op. cit., pp. 394–395.

<sup>32</sup> N.T. Saito, op. cit., p. 71.

<sup>33</sup> K.A. Ono, V.N. Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media*, Cambridge 2009, p. 85.

<sup>34</sup> S.M. Cassinelli, “‘If we are Asian, then are we funny?’: Margaret Cho’s *All-American Girl* as the first (and last?) Asian American sitcom”, *Studies in American Humor* 17, 2008, pp. 140–141.

which reflected the attitudes of the predominantly white producers and writers. Ultimately the series was cancelled after just one season, receiving relatively poor reviews. The short life of this series convinced many producers and showrunners that American television was not yet ready for such a bold representation of Asian Americans, and that notion alone was enough to deter most major TV stations in the 1990s and early 2000s. This example highlights the nature of a centralised mode of production, with predominantly white executives at the helm, which dominated American TV’s landscape during that time. Despite the obvious demand for more visibility and the clear message sent by an increasingly influential movement for more “diversity” in mass media and mainstream television, an arbitrary decision of television producers resulted in a perpetual belief that Asians would not “sell” a show, and their appearance on-screen should be limited to certain already “proven” typecasting, and stereotypes.<sup>35</sup> At this point Asian and Asian American representations in entertainment media were a complex mixture of all the elements derived from both “Yellow Peril” and “model minority” discourses, and adopted as a common set of beliefs. According to George Gerbner’s and Larry Gross’ Cultivation Theory, the ongoing exposure to stereotypes, combined with the low visibility of Asians in mass media resulted in “cultivation” of stereotypes, pulling many viewers towards dominant, established sets of beliefs and images.<sup>36</sup> This process is by no means coherent, and occurs largely on an individual level, with some stereotypes more appealing, or more easily adoptable than others. It is therefore faulty to think that at the beginning of the 21st century either one of the main stereotypes clusters about Asians and Asian Americans dominated over the other. An interesting aspect of this new mixed stereotypes cluster is that all the characteristics attributed to Asians in the “Yellow Peril” discourse have a direct counterpart in the “model minority”, but instead of cancelling each other out, they reinforce themselves. In the words of Gary Okihiro:

The Asian work ethic, family values, self-help, culture and religiosity, and intermarriage — all elements of the model minority can also be read as components of the yellow peril... The yellow peril and the model minority are not poles, denoting opposite representations along a single line, but in fact form a circular relationship that moves in either direction.<sup>37</sup>

For an average viewer and consumer of entertainment media, hardworking and industrious Asians can easily become unfairly competitive and greedy; their family-oriented values can come off as isolationist and insular; and what is mys-

<sup>35</sup> J. Okada, *Making Asian American Film and Video: History, Institutions, Movements*, New Brunswick 2015, p. 112.

<sup>36</sup> G. Gerbner et al., “Living with television: The dynamics of the cultivation process”, [in:] *Perspectives on Media Effects*. Hilldale, eds. J. Bryant, D. Zillman, New York 1986, p. 22.

<sup>37</sup> G. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asian in American History and Culture*, Seattle 1994, p. 141.

terious and exotic about them often changes into strange, bizarre and incomprehensible.<sup>38</sup>

Between the late 1980s and the 1990s, mainly due to continuous improvement in their economic and social status, Asians were steadily becoming one of the most important consumer groups. This was probably the key factor in consolidating the Asian American position as a viable group that began to be noticed by advertisers and, more importantly, producers. The situation of Asians' and Asian Americans' representation and visibility in entertainment media narratives changed with the advent of the post-network television and later, streaming services era. The post-network format and streaming services presented a great potential for producers and networks to capitalise on the ability to reach a much wider and more diverse audience. It was easier to produce series and movies with a more diverse cast, as it was justifiable from the marketing standpoint. In 2015, the Nielsen Global Connect produced a report entitled *Asian-Americans: Culturally Connected and Forging the Future* which is widely quoted as a primary source of information about the changing situation of Asian and Asian American media representations in the aftermath of the post-network-streaming revolution. The report showed that Asian Americans are a diverse and dynamic group with significant purchasing power. Furthermore, it indicated that in general Asian Americans prefer streaming services and internet to live television, with a particular preference towards Amazon, Hulu, and Netflix.<sup>39</sup> In the last two decades, Asian Americans have moved away from mainstream television, which did not represent them, and found alternative platforms for self-representation. They have a noticeable presence on YouTube and numerous video sharing services. However, despite this, mainstream television networks and Hollywood production companies remained indifferent and the number of opportunities for Asian American visibility remained very low.<sup>40</sup>

### The changing face of the “Yellow Peril” — the advent of the streaming revolution and new network television

The timing of the report was not coincidental, as 2015 was a breakthrough year for Asian and Asian American representation in entertainment media with the premiere of the first, overall successful mainstream family sitcom featuring a mostly Asian leading cast — *Fresh off the Boat* (ABC). This show achieved

<sup>38</sup> N.T. Saito, op. cit., p. 71.

<sup>39</sup> S. Shankar, *Advertising Diversity: Ad Agencies and the Creation of Asian American Consumers*, Durham 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

what *All-American Girl* could not, and did so in spectacular fashion, therefore it is worth analysing the dynamics between the two narratives as exemplary for larger trends and changes that occurred in the nearly two decades between their respective premieres. The series is centred on an American-Taiwanese family, the Huangs in 1990s America. Louis (Randall Park) is an aspiring businessman, who struggles to achieve success as a restaurant owner. He has an ambitious wife, Jessica (Constance Wu), whose character is constructed around the classic “dragon lady” stereotype with elements of a relatively newer iteration of it — the so-called “tiger mother”. She is portrayed as a despotic and bossy mother raising her three sons according to a strictly executed plan; however, those traits (characteristic for the “Yellow Peril” discourse) are skilfully balanced by her ambition, assertiveness, confidence and resilience (characteristic of the “model minority”). As a result of the balancing process, Jessica appears more natural and authentic; the stereotypes are used to emphasise her comical aspect, not to construct her character.

In contrast with the strong character of Jessica, Louis displays some elements of the “weak” Asian man or “geek” stereotype, he is afraid of his wife and she is generally “in charge” of family affairs. He is portrayed as stingy and clumsy. However, those “Yellow Peril” stereotypes are constantly countered by his uncharacteristically warm attitude towards his children, completely opposite to the stereotypical cold and severe Asian father. To this extent *Fresh Off the Boat* is very similar narrative-wise to *All-American Girl*, but there is however one key difference — the protagonist. The true leading parts belong to the three sons of the Huangs: Eddie (Hudson Yang), Emery (Forrest Wheeler), and Evan (Ian Chen), with Eddie serving as an occasional narrator and main protagonist. The young boys are more American than Taiwanese, and while there is a lot of plot threads devoted to the complicated relationships with their heritage and their mother, for the most part they are coping with a 1990s United States reality as ordinary teenagers would. Eddie contradicts the stereotype of an obedient and docile Asian student; however, his brothers do possess these characteristics to some extent, which gives a much-needed narrative contrast. This key element serves to relieve the weight of the stereotypical portrayal of their parents and eliminates the need for more “Americanised”, familiar and appealing characters.

Another key factor is the multigenerational structure of the family (typical for American Asian families). Louise’s mother, Jenny (Lucille Soong), lives with the Huangs, and she is a brilliantly written recurring character with an important narrative function. She speaks only Mandarin Chinese (which creates an interesting cross-cultural perspective) and serves as a source of ironic commentary about Asian American stereotypes in general. She possesses many exaggerated features attributed to elderly Chinese women, like greed, conservatism, a propensity towards gambling and sweets etc. However, she balances these with humour and wisdom, which makes her more akin to a stereotypical grumpy but loving granny, rather than an Asian American “dragon lady”. The significance of the narrative

structure of *Fresh Off the Boat* and the writing of its characters lies in its integration and reiteration of existing stereotypes. Constructing characters completely lacking them would have most likely resulted in overdramatisation, which is not acceptable within the sitcom format. However, skilfully playing with them and countering their negativity with certain more neutral or positive elements allows for relatable and believable characters. This challenges the common presumptions about Asian Americans and makes them less “exotic” or “alien”, their otherness serves the purpose of diversification rather than alienation. Unfortunately, while *Fresh Off the Boat* is clearly a very promising symptom of larger trends occurring in social media and internet streaming services, it is still relatively isolated as a commercial success. Other examples of effective incorporation of large Asian leading casts include many streaming shows with big budgets and high production values such as Amazon’s *Man in the High Castle* (Amazon Prime, 2015–2019), the second season of *Terror* (AMC, 2018), or *Star Trek Discovery* (CBS All Access, 2017–?).

## Summary

The contrast between *All-American Girl* and *Fresh Off the Boat* reveals an important truth about the role of stereotypes in entertainment media narratives. Twenty years ago, Asian American actors (as exemplified by Margaret Cho) were placed in an impossible situation, trying to represent Asian Americans as a group, while at the same time attempting to assert their individual identities as Asian Americans and all of this under pressure to remain appealing to a broad (by default white) audience. In such complicated circumstances stereotypes became a burden that dragged the narrative and transformed the comedic side of the narrative into a grotesque example of symbolic “yellowface”. The repetitive nature of a TV series caused the audience to be constantly exposed to the same set of stereotypes which makes the characters appear flat, predictable and uninteresting. A narrative based on stereotypes inevitably becomes entangled in them, and cannot develop beyond the confines of those structures. The key to understand the successes of *Fresh Off the Boat* is to view it not as an attempt at Asian American representation but rather a narrative that recognises stereotypes for what they are — an integral part of being an Asian American. The appeal this series holds for Asian American viewers is the way in which it is able to offer an ironic outlook of stereotypical representations and use them to make the characters become more believable. The characters in *Fresh Off the Boat* face the burden of representing Asian Americans by acknowledging the fact that stereotypes are a part of their reality and should be recognised, highlighted and deconstructed through irony. This process has great

comedic potential, as it turns out better than simple exploitation and perpetuation of stereotypes.

Post-network television and streaming services have created a platform for new types of representations, for the most part free from the constraints of ratings, and the utopian regime of being appealing to every group of viewers. It is important to notice, however, that while the “streaming revolution” certainly has changed the landscape for Asian and Asian American presence on screen, existing narratives are still racially-centred. Series like *Fresh Off The Boat* are still defined by the central role of their “predominantly Asian cast”, which distinguishes them from the mainstream. Perhaps the next step in the development of Asian American representations in the aftermath of the streaming revolution would be the emergence of non-racial or even post-racial narratives — completely free from the key role of the racial element. In the last two decades both streaming and network productions have clearly shown that Asian American narratives have the potential to be commercially successful while remaining critically significant and retaining a subversive potential. Unfortunately, Hollywood remains much more conservative. Since 2016 there has been a string of big Hollywood productions with repetitive cases of “whitewashing” and even “yellowface”, particular examples of which are: *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), *Doctor Strange* (2016), or *Power Rangers* (2017). Some Netflix productions like *Iron Fist* (2017–2018) also attracted a significant amount of controversy and sparked a discussion on the issue. The future is not clear, especially considering the rising competition on the streaming market, which may have a negative impact on artistic freedom and political subversiveness. It seems that the face of the “Yellow Peril” may be forever changing, and never ultimately changed.

## Zmienne oblicze „żółtego niebezpieczeństwa” — przedstawienia Azjatów i Azjatoamerykanów w kontekście „rewolucji streamingowej” w Stanach Zjednoczonych

### Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest krytyczna analiza zmieniającego się krajobrazu amerykańskich produkcji streamingowych i sieciowych w kontekście reprezentacji Azjatów i Amerykanów azjatyckiego pochodzenia. Przedmiotem analizy były przede wszystkim stereotypy — mechanizmy leżące u podstaw ich budowy i dekonstrukcji oraz ich rola w kształtowaniu popularnego wizerunku Azjatów i Amerykanów azjatyckiego pochodzenia. Celem sekundarnym była próba pokazania, jak kulturowo skonstruowany „inny” jest stale obecny w powszechnej wyobraźni odbiorców telewizyjnych i kinowych oraz jak konstrukt ten wpływa na firmy produkcyjne, odbiorców i showrunnerów w USA. Pytanie o postulowaną „zmianę” w reprezentacji Azjatów i Amerykanów azjatyckiego pochodzenia

oraz ich widoczność pozostaje otwarte na dalszą debatę. Podjąłem jednak próbę zawężenia jej do modelowego przykładu dwóch seriali z ostatnich dwudziestu lat.

Słowa-klucze: telewizja, rewolucja streamingowa, Azjaci, Stany Zjednoczone, reprezentacja, stereotypy, orientalizm

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