

Images of Asians and Asian-Americans: The Under-representation and Misrepresentation of Asians and Asian-Americans on American Television

Ling-hsuan Larry Tung, Kean University

Abstract

Asians or Asian Americans constitute approximately four percent of the entire U.S. population. With a growing number of immigrants from China, Vietnam, the Philippines and other parts of Asia, Asians are one of the fastest growing minority groups in America. Although Asians have resided in America throughout three-fourths of the nation's history, many fourth-generation or fifth-generation Asian Americans still feel like foreigners in this country in many ways. As new generations of Asian or Asian Americans strive to take prominent roles in American society, including politics, academics, as well as the media industry, the representation of Asians or Asian Americans in the media has rarely reflected that fact. In this study, I argue that the under-representation and stereotypes of minorities on television have misled the viewing public to form inaccurate perception on minority groups based on mostly distorted or insignificant portrayals they see on a daily-basis. In order to provide fair representation of minorities to the general public and avoid creating stereotypes or misunderstandings, television networks, which bear the responsibility of social education as public domain, ought to hire more production and editorial personnel with minority background to provide objective perspectives to the programming. Meanwhile, people of minority background should also strive to become active members of the media to write stories about themselves and make their voice heard so that representation of them in the media can accurately reflect who they are and their contribution to the society.

Introduction

Television is one of the greatest inventions in the history of mankind. While most Americans spend an average of three hours watching television on a daily basis, it has become a major source of information and slowly surpassed or even replaced other educational institutions or sources of knowledge, such as schools and books. Through the frequent exposure to television's fast-paced, commercial-oriented and sometimes depth-lacking style of programming, the viewers' ideas and attitudes towards certain things and groups of people can easily be influenced, especially those that are new or unfamiliar to them.

Immigrants who come from all over the world to settle down in America are one of the perfect examples that are new or unfamiliar to many people in America, which is made up of a majority of Caucasians of European descent and smaller numbers of ethnic minorities. Although America has considered itself a nation of immigrants—a so-called “melting pot” as

known by the rest of the world, people of colors, or minorities, U.S.-born or not, remain new and unfamiliar to many Euro-Americans. Among them, Asians are especially exotic to the general American public as Asia is relatively different from America in terms of cultural, historic background and geographical location compared to other ethnic groups such as the Hispanics. And the portrayals and representation of those people often pose a great influence on the perception of Asians or Asian-Americans for the viewing public.

As Stuart Hall (2000), a renowned communication scholar, put it, racism and the media touch directly the problem of ideology, since the media's main sphere of operations is the production and transformation of ideologies (p. 272). Defining that ideology consists in the articulation of different elements into a distinctive set or chain of meanings instead of isolated and separated concepts, Hall (2000) believes that ideologies are not products of individual consciousness or intention. "They pre-date individuals, and form part of the determinate social formations and conditions in which individuals are born," wrote Hall. "...Largely, the process works unconsciously, rather than by conscious intention. Ideologies produce different forms of social consciousness, rather than being produced by them. They work effectively when we are not aware that how we formulate and construct a statement about the world is underpinned by ideological premises ...Racism is one of the most profoundly 'naturalized' of existing ideologies" (p. 272).

"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," added Hall. Television, among all forms of media, tends to provide the most sensational visual images to the viewers and is considered the most powerful medium of communication.

David Piehl and Richard Ruppel (1993) also wrote that "the ramification of television programming on the viewing public exceeds a mere reflection of a perceived reality" (p. 182).

In fact, television's perceived reality, however misleading, too often becomes the viewers' actual reality. That is especially true now that the amount of television viewing is reaching unprecedented levels. ... Virtually all social scientists have acknowledged that attitudes, values, and behavior may be developed, at least in part, through observational learning," Piehl and Ruppel wrote [about media research] in their article. They added that the selective attention on Asians or Asian-Americans on American television, they said, results in an incomplete, sometimes biased sense of reality on the part of the audience as the audience often assumes that the media pay attention to things that make a difference in society or things of consequence. The misconception might lead to the inevitable conclusion that Asia and Asian people make little difference in contemporary life, that they are of little consequence (p.184).

Asians or Asian-Americans constitute approximately 4.8 percent of the population in America. With a growing numbers of immigrants from China, Vietnam, the Philippines and other parts of Asia, Asians are one of the fastest growing minority groups in America. Where media research about representations of Asians or Asian-Americans is inadequate, research about minorities in general will be used, because minorities share similar problems in terms of media representation.

As new generations of Asian or Asian-Americans strive to take prominent roles in American society, including politics, academics, as well as the media industry, the representation of Asians or Asian-Americans has rarely reflected that fact. Thus, more and

more Asian-Americans who are aware of the under-representation have stood up to address the issue and challenge the media industry for fair representation.

The research shall be of interest for members of the Asian-American community, minority civil rights groups as well as major network personnel. It will also help them re-examine the roles of Asians or Asian-Americans on television and lead to more discussions in the social context.

Review of Literature

Under-representation

Minorities are often under-represented on television. As Hispanic-Americans became the largest ethnic group in America and African Americans play an important role in American entertainment industry, Asians or Asian-Americans are often left out in the picture and seem “invisible” most of the time. As Darrell Hamamoto (1994), a communication professor, wrote: “Asians or Asian-Americans, when represented at all, they exist primarily for the convenience and benefit of the Euro-American lead players. ... Rarely are the lives of Asian-American characters examined on their own merit, and the problems they face in daily life are not considered to be intrinsic interest” (p. 206).

Noting that African-Americans seem to be the one nonwhite group to have overcome the marginalization on network television, Hamamoto emphasized that the story lines and characters are evaluated and accepted on the basis of how they relate to mainstream television programs and to the dominant society. He also pointed out that the popular appeal of programs such as *The Cosby Show* and *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* stems from their congruity with upper-middle-class Euro-American values, but given an African American angle (p. 206).

Some civil rights advocates attribute the under-representation to the lack of Asian writers in major networks, but Hamamoto said it was the commercialism of television that leaves little hope for better representation of Asians or Asian-Americans. “Network television is a creature of the supranational interests of media oligopolies, one of its implicit function is to provide ideological legitimacy for an unstable, crisis-ridden advanced capitalist social order that ever threatens to fragment along class, gender, age and racial lines” wrote Hamamoto (p.207). “Network television personnel must therefore adhere to the basic entertainment creed—recognition and identification of the widest possible audience. So long as network television maintains its structural relationship to the inner workings of oligopoly capitalism, there is little that Asian-American representations will change for the better,” he added (p.207).

Stereotyping Asians

Most people might agree that, if you have watched, listened to and read media all your life, you probably have filed these images into your thinking process: African-Americans are mostly rap stars, drug dealers, single mothers, or criminals. Latinos are illegal aliens or ignorant immigrants who can’t even speak English. Asian-Americans are weak, model citizens or manipulative invaders of business in America. Middle Easterners are terrorists and Native Americans are drunk Indians who hate Caucasians and sleep their lives away.

The role of “Ms. Swan” of Fox’s “*Mad TV*” is one of the examples of stereotyping Asians on television that have haunted Asian-Americans for decades. Ms. Swan is a gibberish-speaking nail salon owner played by a non-Asian actor who wears a black wig. The character has generated immense rage from Asian-American community and many had called

on Fox to take the character off air. Guy Aoki, president of the Media Action Network for Asian-Americans, told the San Diego Union-Tribune on August 15 that “By making fun of the way she talks, ‘Mad TV’ just mocks her ethnicity. ... The character drives home the same message that Hollywood has been putting out for years: All Asians talk funny, we are culturally incompatible with other Americans, and we don’t really belong in our own country.”

“Mr. Wong”, an animation cartoon character of Icebox.com, serves as another example of stereotyping Asians and has drawn mixed reaction. The 85-year-old, bucked toothed, yellowed-faced Chinese houseboy serves tea to his white socialite boss, Miss Pam, who is always insulting her servant. When he becomes ill, Miss Pam asks, “What’s wrong? You look more yellow than normal.” According to a report on August 21 by Los Angeles Times’ Marian Liu (2000), a survey of 9,125 respondents found that 53 percent consider the character offensive while only 28 said it was funny. For many Asian Americans, especially the older ones, Mr. Wong is reminiscent of derogatory caricatures of Yellow Peril and Charlie Chan.

“Asian Americans need to realize that stereotypes work in subtle ways now. People don’t wear bed sheets; it’s not that overt anymore. All these racist events in history create a backdrop of how people perceive Asians,” said Jerry Kang, a law professor at University of California, Los Angeles, (p. F4).

Asian-Americans: Foreigners at Home?

The presence of Asians in America started in approximately 150 years ago when workers from China were brought to America to build railroads. Although Asians have resided in America throughout three-fourths of the nation’s history, many fourth-generation or fifth-generation Asian-Americans still feel like foreigners in this country. As National Public Radio (2000) reported on October 14, “Many Asian-American civil rights advocates believe that in the public mind, all people of Asian ancestry are perpetual foreigners.” It pointed out a common concern shared by many members of the Asian-American community that despite America claimed to be a liberal and diverse nation, the presence of Asians or Asian-Americans has long been neglected and often seems “invisible”.

Robert G. Lee (1999), said most Americans have an assumption to equate Asians with alien although Asians have been a historical presence in America. An example in Lee’s book clearly points out the anachronistic assumption: In November 1996, the board of the Association for Asian Americans Studies held its business meeting in San Diego. After a long day of discussing the mundane affairs of state in the academic profession, academics from half a dozen universities adjourned to a nearby Thai restaurant where the conversation was relaxed and lively. As the food arrived, another patron, a Caucasian gentleman in tweeds, strode over to the table and asked the inevitable: “Where are you from?” After a moment of acute silence, the answers rolled back: “New York, Chicago, Providence, Ann Arbor, Irvine, and San Diego.” Clearly bewildered that these Orientals did not understand his questions, their fellow American shook his head in disbelief before exiting (p. 15). “‘Oakland’ or ‘Oshkosh’ is never the acceptable answer, and its rejection reveals at once that the question is not about hometowns. The repeated question always implies, ‘You couldn’t be from here’, Lee added in the book.

Meanwhile, as new generations of Asian-Americans find their ways to integrate into the mainstream of American society, with more participation in public affairs and popular

culture than ever, they are more aware of the under-representation and stereotypes on television and are concerned that the imprecise portrayals or stereotypes might lead to deeper ethnic misunderstandings.

Helen Zia, a second-generation Chinese-American journalist and writer, told *The Quill* (2000), an electronic magazine for writers, in July that the media often stereotype Asians: "There are fundamental stereotypes of Asian-Americans today—the gook, the geek and the geisha," Zia said as quoted by the e-magazine. "With news being such a fast-paced and deadline-driven profession, there isn't often enough time to know these people and their experiences. People resort to what they know. And a lot comes from Hollywood movies and television" (p. 82).

Asian Actors: Minority Quota to Fill?

Christina Chang, a Taiwan-born actress, told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* in September that some of her fellow actress friends said Asian-American actors are so "in" right now that others have to go up against them for jobs. "You wonder, are we just the flavor of the year right now?" Chang said. "Are you getting a part because you beat everybody else (at the audition), or because somebody had a minority quota to fill?" Chang also said her Asian decency had made several television producers ask her if she had martial arts training or if she speaks Cantonese. In addition, having been on "The Cosby Show" and "As the World Turns", Chang said she usually plays sexless roles like doctors or lawyers.

In March 1997, the cover of the *National Review* featured President Bill Clinton, first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, and Vice President Al Gore, all in yellowface. The cover story summarized allegations that the Clinton administration had solicited campaign donations from Asian contributors in exchange for policy favors. The editors of the *National Review* indicated that the first family had been so polluted by Asian money that they had literally turned yellow. The story immediately generated fierce discussions among Asian-American academicians. Lee (1999) said the yellowface sharply defines the Orientals in a racial opposition to whiteness. "Yellowface exaggerates 'racial' features that have been designed 'Oriental'. Only the racialized Oriental is yellow; Asians are not. Asia is not a biological fact but a geographic designation. Asians come in the broadest range of skin color and hue" (p. 2).

Battles with the Networks

With growing demands for more minority roles on television from minority groups, however, network executives are under immense pressure. The lack of representation of minorities has been a thorny issue for the networks, who have faced ongoing criticism from the creative community and advocacy groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

According to a report by *Los Angeles Times'* Greg Braxton on May 20, 2000, some advocacy groups charged that prime-time television programming, specifically the 1999-2000 season's near total exclusion of minority actors in any role of significance, was ignoring the changing cultural landscape of the country. In response to months of negotiations with advocacy groups, executives at CBS, NBC, ABC and Fox finally agreed to implement a number of strategies to increase diversity.

In an interview with Greg Braxton (2000) of the *L.A. Times*, Scott Sassa, president of NBC West Coast, emphasized his network's efforts to add diversity to its programming.

“Steps were made. We made progress. Certainly the awareness was up. There is some distance we have to go, and that will come from training and meeting new people,” Sassa told the Los Angeles Times.

Josie Thomas, senior vice president for diversity at CBS, told David Folkenflik of the Baltimore Sun in October that the network’s show offer 25 percent more minority characters than a year ago. “I think when our viewers and other interested parties look at what we’ve accomplished in one year, they will be very impressed,” said Thomas. (Braxton 2000)

But many civil rights advocates argue that number can be deceiving. According to Fall Colors 2003-2004, a primetime television diversity report released by Children Now, an advocacy group, showed that among role types of total characters, just one in ten Asian/Pacific Islander characters played a starring role. And in 2001 and 2003, only one percent of Asian/Pacific Islander characters received opening credits, down from two percent in 1999 and 2000.

Legal Measure to Ensure Fairness in the Media

The Fairness Doctrine, the broadcast industry’s previous framework for fairness and accountability, was first introduced by the Federal Communications Commission in 1949. It was promulgated to protect and encourage participation by minority voices on the airwaves, following the basic tenets of a representative democracy and served as a watchdog, charging radio and television station programmers with the responsibility of speaking to controversial issues of public interest as well as providing multiple viewpoints on each of these issues. However, the Federal Communications Commission voted to abolish the Fairness Doctrine in 1987 as an indirect result of a celebrated 1982 suit pitting the Syracuse Peace Council against the Meredith Corporation.

However, in the past several attempts have been made to reinstate the Fairness Doctrine in its original form or with modification but failed due to opposition from broadcasters contending that the law had violated their First Amendment rights as well as creating a discriminatory chasm between them and other media owners, primarily newspapers and magazine publishers.

But as Marilyn J. Matelski (1995), a communication professor at Boston College, wrote in a Spring 1995 Nieman Report: “While it is true that the world is a very different place than that reflected in the 1949 Fairness Doctrine, it can also be said that without some mandate for responsibility to the public, it is easy to slip into an ethical vacuum. ... Fairness might need to be redefined, revised and recodified as radio and television enter into the new century; but it should not be removed from formal discussion” (p. 33-36).

Conclusion

The under-representation and stereotypes of minorities on television have misled the viewing public to form inaccurate perception on minority groups based on mostly distorted or insignificant portrayals they see on a daily-basis. It again proves that television or the media in general is a great influence on the attitudes and values of a society.

Thus, fair and accurate representation of minorities on television will effectively enhance understandings about the nation’s minorities among the viewing public, and therefore help them form appropriate attitudes and values. In order to provide fair representation of minorities to the general public and avoid creating stereotypes or misunderstandings, television networks, which bear the responsibility of social education as public domain, ought

to hire more production and editorial personnel with minority background to provide objective perspectives to the programming. Network executives should also establish appropriate channels to communicate with advocacy groups and conduct annual reviews of programming to examine the diversity on the airwaves.

References

- Braxton, G. (2000, May 20). TV's Fall Programming Lineup: Is This Their Final Answer; Diversity Reflect Some Progress, But Ethnic Shows and Roles Are Still in the Great Minority. *Los Angeles Times*, pp. F1.
- Children Now. (2004, April). Fall Colors 2003-2004: Prime Time TV Diversity Report. Oakland, CA: Author.
- Folkenflick, D. (2000, October 11). Diversity's Slow Progress. *The Baltimore Sun*, pp. 2E.
- Hall, S. (2000). Racist Ideologies and the Media. *Media Studies: A Reader*. New York NY: New York University Press, pp. 271-282.
- Hamamoto, D. Y. (1994). *Monitored Peril: Asian Americans and the Politics of TV Representation*. Minneapolis, MN: the University of Minnesota Press.
- Lee, R. G. (1999). *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Liu, M. (2000, August 21). What's Wrong with Mr. Wong?: Irreverent, Trash-Talking Internet Cartoon from the Writers of South Park Walks a Fine Line. Critics Call It Racist. Fans Say It's Just Plain Funny. *Los Angeles Times*, pp. F4.
- Marris, P. & Thornham, S. (Eds.). (2000). *Media Studies: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press.
- Matelski, M. J. (1995 Spring). Fair's fair...or is it? *Nieman Report*, 49, 33-36.
- Media Often Stereotype Asians. (2000, July). *The Quill*, 88, 72.
- National Public Radio. (2000, October 14). *Weekly Edition*.
- Piehl, D. & Ruppel, R. (1994). Primetime's Hidden Agenda: The Anti-Asian Bias of American Television. *A Gathering of Voices on the Asian American Experience*. Fort Atkinson, WI: Highsmith Press, pp. 179-185.
- Tung, J. (2000, May 21). View; Asian 'It' Girls Say So Long to the Dragon Lady. *The New York Times*, pp. 9-1.
- White-Parks, Buffton, Chiu, et al. (Eds.). (1994). *A Gathering of Voices on the Asian American Experience*. Fort Atkinson, WI: Highsmith Press.
- Zia, H. (1997, December 22). Can Asian-Americans Turn the Tide? *The Nation*, 265, 10.