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# Media Bears Responsibility for Reinforcing Asian American Stereotypes (Guest Column)

By Grace Kao, Peter Shinkoda



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We mourn the loss of eight individuals, including six Asian American women, gunned down in Atlanta on March 16, a tragedy has catalyzed discussions of the racist and sexist stereotypes of Asian American women.

Stereotypes of Asian American women do not exist in a vacuum. Media portrayals of Asian American women and men play a part in how Asian American women are viewed. Part of our healing process must be reckoning with what contributed to conditions that led to these brutal murders.

Coverage surrounding the deaths in Atlanta has reiterated the characterizations of Asian American women that are painful and common. For example, Shaila Dewan argued in *The New York Times* that, “Asian-American women have long been stereotyped as sexually submissive, portrayed in popular culture as exotic ‘lotus blossoms’.” Nadia Kim, in a recent op-ed in *Public Seminar*, wrote, “That six of his victims were East Asian American women fits into a sad pattern of sexually objectifying women of Asian descent and stereotyping them as meek.”

If Asians are viewed as quiet and submissive, then Asian American women are treated as ultra-feminine while Asian American men are stripped of their masculinity. Asian American men are seen as passive, geeky and unattractive, which in turn makes Asian American women seem more available as objects of desire. This portrayal is harder to pinpoint, but equally dangerous.

Jeff Adachi’s documentary, “*The Slanted Screen*” (2009), provides an overview of the history of Asian American men in Hollywood films. He argues that Asian American men are usually absent, but when they do appear, they are almost never portrayed as having any sexual desire. Romantic relationships, when they involve Asian Americans, are typically between a white man and an Asian American woman (and more often than not, a willing Asian prostitute as exemplified by the well-known quote, “Me so horny. Me love you a long time,” from Stanley Kubrick’s “*Full Metal Jacket*” (1987).

Peter’s experiences over 30 years as a professional actor has been an exercise in this typecasting.

“I have appeared in 60 film and TV projects. In almost every case, my character was unable to express any sexual or romantic desire,” he says. “In fact, in only two of my roles did my character have a love interest – however, both of these were doomed.

“In ‘*Supernatural*,’ my character briefly kisses his beautiful wife, but the moment was shot from a distance and out-of-focus. Later in the episode, my character mutilated and sexually assaulted his wife after being taken over by a shapeshifter. My character was quickly arrested by the two white male heroes of the show. The second time was in the science-fiction series ‘*Falling Skies*,’ in which I portrayed the lead role of Dai. An alien memory implant causes Tom, the white lead character, to imagine that my character was actually married to his wife Anne. My character was only in a romantic relationship because of a false memory implant,” he says.

Film scholar Peter Feng also described racially charged portrayals of Asian American men as desexualized and effeminate. In my book, “*The Company We Keep: Interracial Friendships and Romantic Relationships From Adolescence to Adulthood*,” co-authored by Kara Joyner and Kelly Stamper Balistreri, I have found that Asian American men were less likely to have romantic partners. OK Cupid’s analyses of their own data showed that women find Asian American men less attractive than other men. Researchers Jennifer Lundquist and Ken-Hou Lin also discovered that straight white women and gay men were least likely to respond to messages from Asian American men on an internet dating website.

These patterns are echoed in individual accounts from Asian American men. Celebrity chef Eddie Huang wrote in the New York Times, “Yet the one joke that still hurts, the sore spot that even my closest friends will press, the one stereotype...is that women don’t want Asian men.” These experiences are manifested in the acting roles for which Peter has been cast – his characters have never had an ordinary romantic relationship.

Recent films like “Crazy Rich Asians” (2018) and “Always Be My Maybe” (2019) that include Asian American male romantic leads give us some hope. Asian and Asian American films such as “Parasite” (2019), “The Farewell” (2019), and “Minari” (2020) have well-rounded Asian American characters who can express the full spectrum of human emotions. The popularity of BTS and K-pop can also increase the stature of Asian and Asian American men. BTS was the top-selling musical artist worldwide in 2020 and are currently the most visible Asian celebrity. They have publicly spoken about the racism they face when outside South Korea and released a powerful statement expressing their concern for the anti-Asian hate crimes and racist incidents in the US.

The images of whites and minorities of all gender groups exist in the same space. One group is deemed as more masculine because another is viewed as more feminine. The devastating attack in Atlanta, and the troubling rise in violence against Asian Americans over the past year, must be understood as the result of historical and contemporary social forces shaped jointly by race and gender. These longstanding stereotypical images have been reinforced by Hollywood and other mass media. The racist stereotypes of Asian American men support the racist and misogynistic images of Asian American women. As we grapple with what happened in Atlanta we would be remiss to ignore the impact of these common tropes.

*Grace Kao is the IBM Professor of Sociology and Professor of Ethnicity, Race, and Migration at Yale University.*

*Peter Shinkoda has been a film and TV actor for more than three decades. His recent credits include TNT’s “Falling Skies,” Netflix’s “Daredevil” and Amazon’s “Man in the High Castle.”*

*(Pictured: Grace Kao, Peter Shinkoda)*

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