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The Asian and Asian American Experience  
Through Film & Personal Narrative

Nyaari Kothiya, Jason Le, & Anna Sakamoto

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## INTRODUCTION

An identity is made up of many aspects. For example, race, ethnicity, and culture are fundamental working parts of an identity as one cannot be examined without being influenced by others. Objectively, one can argue that the term “Asian” means a person of Asian descent while “Asian American” is a person who is ethnically Asian, but is a United States citizen. However, subjectively, these terms take on a different meaning depending on the person. In this paper, we define the word “Asian” as being a person of Asian descent more aligned, socially and culturally, with their country of origin more so than the United States. “Asian American” means a person of Asian descent more aligned with American culture, still retaining aspects of their Asian culture. There are countless stories by and about Asians and Asian Americans available in English and various media. This winter project team studied film as a medium for such storytelling. Films, both nonfiction and fiction, capture both the Asian and Asian American experiences.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze an array of films about Asian and Asian American experiences. The factors that we took into consideration while selecting films include: the presence of an Asian cast, the portrayal of an aspect of being Asian and/or Asian American, the film’s popularity in media, and recommendations from Professor Omori for a historical range. We also tried to include a variety of genres but didn’t consider the director’s or creator’s race as a determining factor. In this paper, we examine a brief history of Asians and Asian Americans in the United States, and our experiences as Asians and/or Asian Americans at Hamilton College. We also discuss common themes in films we watched in order to understand the Asian or Asian American experience as told through film as a medium. The themes we chose to analyze include: family, the American Dream, transition, feeling out of place, the model minority myth, and stigma. In exploring the themes, we analyze the films and weave in personal anecdotes.

This project emerged from a compelling passion and genuine curiosity to understand what it means to be Asian or Asian American. We are audience members who have chosen to write a paper in the hopes of learning about ourselves, one another, and other Asian cultures. We tried to approach each analysis without bias and made sure to thoroughly research familiar and unfamiliar topics highlighted in each film. Jason Le was born and raised in Orange County, California for half his life and currently resides in Houston, Texas. He identifies as a Vietnamese American and is looking to explore what it means to be Asian American in both the United States and at Hamilton College. Nyaari Kothiya was born in India and immigrated to the United States, moving to New Jersey during her sophomore year of high school. She struggles to label herself as either Asian or Asian American and aims to gain a clearer understanding of herself through this project. Anna Sakamoto was born and raised in Tokyo, Japan and later moved to Honolulu, Hawaii. She is half Japanese and half Caucasian and is looking to gain a better understanding of cultures and experiences outside of East Asia. This research fellowship is dear to our hearts and deeply personal. We appreciate this opportunity presented to us by the Levitt Center and Professor Kyoko Omori.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The history of Asian immigration to the United States and Asian Americans is linked to hundreds of years of imperialism and colonialism. Please note that this section is not a complete recounting of every ethnic group's experience, but one that touches upon prominent episodes and recurring themes.

The first immigrants from Asia settled on the shores of the thirteen colonies as early as 1763, more than a decade before the birth of the United States. Filipino sailors deserted Spanish

ships, leaving their colonial masters and residing near the future New Orleans where they would quietly stay.

The first mass migration of immigrants from Asia took place a century later when Chinese men arrived to take part in California's gold rush. Driven from China by poverty, lack of economic opportunity, political unrest, and a collapsing dynastic government, the early immigrants were enticed by glorious visions of a "Gold Mountain" that would make them so wealthy that they could return home after a mere sojourn. Few fulfilled this dream; most struggled in the United States, relegated to menial labor. The white population was suspicious of the Chinese from the start. Prospectors from the east hungered for the same gold and work and resented that the Chinese were willing to toil for less money.

Chinese sojourners-cum-settlers are part of the story of America's great westward expansion in the mid-nineteenth century. Actively recruited in China for their industriousness, they proved essential workers in laying track for the Central Pacific Railroad and Transcontinental Railroad. The workers angered their competitors because they were willing to labor for less under harsher, more perilous conditions. White Americans who felt threatened economically accused them of not assimilating and being morally degenerate.

Chinese workers also traveled to Hawaii to work on the sugar plantations. Although Hawaii had not yet been annexed by the United States, American plantation owners actively recruited them from 1850 on. In time the Chinese would be joined by Japanese, Korean, and Filipino workers -- as many as 300,000 in total would arrive over the course of seventy years and significantly shift the population to become an Asian majority on the islands. Nevertheless, they all encountered discrimination, assigned to the lowliest labor, and were deprived of rights.

Conditions on plantations proved as arduous as on the railroads, although the work was steadier with multi-year contracts and life less transient.

Ultimately, those first invited to work in the United States would be the first excluded. The anti-Chinese sentiment, arising from steadily simmering economic competition and biased perceptions of an alien race, reached a fevered pitch with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 that specifically prohibited Chinese laborers. The wording was direct, stating that the flow of Chinese laborers “endangers the good order of certain localities within the territory thereof.” Once invited, then damned, Chinese laborers were subject to the first and only major legislation banning a specific nationality from immigrating to the United States. This Act strengthened the systemic racial hierarchy in America and served as a precedent for future ethnically and racially targeted restrictions.

The Chinese Exclusion Act immediately and dramatically reduced immigration from China, but the American need for labor continued unabated. Immigrants from Japan filled the void, constituting a second wave of immigrants from Asia. Young Japanese men traveled to the west coast and Hawaii with dreams of amassing enough gold in three years to return to Japan and never have to work again. Instead of the lustrous mountain of the gold rush, they believed that the roads were paved with gold and the trees lush with jewels -- so wild were the pitches of job recruiters in Japan for the plantations and railroads. Japanese men -- second sons in a land of primogeniture, from tax-choked farms and impoverished villages, began immigrating to Hawaii in 1868 and the west coast in the 1890s. Their experiences were similar to those of the Chinese. They were in demand for their work ethic but paid too little to prosper. Owing to discriminatory legislation in states, such as Washington and California, they were unable to venture much beyond the railroads for occupations, as they were prohibited from owning land. Instead, they

left the railroads to work the land as tenant farmers. Through dint of their unstinting attention to small farms, many succeeded but met hostility from whites who perceived them as foreigners threatening their own economic viability, false fears from a fragile majority.

Unlike the Chinese, Japanese women also immigrated en masse to the United States. They began arriving in the early 20th century as picture brides, women wed in Japan with their grooms in absentia, through arranged marriages between families. The women disembarked from ships in the United States, holding photographs of their spouses, often surprised to find wizened men in the place of the young bachelors pictured. These women were not sojourners but settlers who lent stability to the ethnic Japanese population. The couples began to have families, determined to stay in the United States and raise their children as Americans.

Yet there was a growing undercurrent of tension between white society and Japanese immigrants. The “Yellow Peril” idea took hold in the press and, by extension, the popular imagination from the turn of the century. It was a historical concept with economic roots and an international, political dimension. As the United States expanded into the Pacific, victorious in the Spanish-American War at the turn of the century and ambitious in its reach into Cuba, Hawaii, and the Philippines etc., it increasingly viewed Japan as its Pacific imperial rival. In the space of a decade, the small island nation had astonished the world by vanquishing China in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895 and Russia in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. The American jingoistic press played upon fear and rivalry and promoted views of the Japanese in the United States as spies for the emperor. Political cartoons depicted the Japanese as “Asian hordes” and warned that the “Yellow Peril” would culminate in an invasion, miscegenation, and the destruction of the white race. This conspiracy theory would continue to negatively impact

US-Japan relations, attitudes towards Japanese communities, and relations with individual Japanese in the United States.

The flow of Japanese to the United States diminished abruptly in 1908 when the United States and Japan concluded what was euphemistically called the Gentlemen's Agreement in which they agreed that Japan would not issue more passports to Japanese laborers who wished to go to the United States. Although others, such as students or professionals, were permitted, the effect of the Gentlemen's Agreement was similar to the effect of the Chinese Exclusion Act. It also arose from fears that the Japanese would take American jobs. There was one major exception to the Agreement: Japanese women could still immigrate. From that point, thousands of women -- usually picture brides -- headed eastward. Yet, less than two decades later, in the wake of post-WWI isolationism and nativism, Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1924. It greatly limited immigration from Eastern Europe and Japan, essentially ending Japanese immigration.

On December 7th, 1941, when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, longtime American suspicions towards Japan were confirmed. To this day, the adjective "sneak" often precedes "attack" in describing Japan's assault. By mid-February 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing the "evacuation" of ethnic Japanese from the west coast, motivated by fears that ethnic Japanese on the west coast were spies loyal to Japan. This order set in motion the internment of approximately 120,000 ethnic Japanese within three months. Two-thirds were US-born, second-generation American citizens. Dispatched inland to remote concentration camps without the benefit of due process, they were incarcerated on the judicial basis of posing threats to national security. Despite exhaustive investigations, not a single person was ever proved to have committed an act of sabotage.

Less than three years ago, in 2018, the United States Supreme Court finally recognized that the internment was unconstitutional. In criticizing the decision of *Korematsu v. United States* that upheld the internment, Chief Justice John Roberts wrote, “The forcible relocation of U.S. citizens to concentration camps, solely and explicitly on the basis of race, is objectively unlawful and outside the scope of presidential authority.” He added, “*Korematsu* was gravely wrong the day it was decided, has been overruled in the court of history, and -- to be clear -- ‘has no place in law under the Constitution.’”

Ironically, the chief justice expressed these words when the Court upheld President Trump’s travel ban for citizens from several largely Muslim countries. The former President’s Executive Order 13769, issued in 2017, restricted travel to the U.S. from Iran, Iraq, Syria (including refugees), Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen. In instituting this ban, the Trump administration reinforced anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiments, racial tensions, and structural racism. Banning travel from predominantly Muslim countries in three versions of the executive order breached international agreements opposing discrimination on the basis of nationality. In this way, the Muslim Ban was a throwback to the Chinese Exclusion Act.

The historical context that we have provided so far focuses on how fraught legal immigration has been from China and Japan in the past 150 years, how the immigrants were beckoned, subjugated, and perceived as fundamentally foreign. There is a direct connection between this prejudice and how not only immigrants, but also citizens of Japanese descent were arrested en masse, rounded up, and imprisoned during World War II. At the same time, there are many other groups with their own complicated encounters with a nation whose identity has been steeped in a culture of whites as the dominant race.

Filipinos began immigrating to the United States in large numbers after the Philippines became an American territory in 1898. In the 1920s and 1930s, they experienced poor treatment similar to the Chinese and Japanese who preceded them. California passed an anti-miscegenation law during this time to protect so-called racial purity. When the Philippines achieved independence in 1935, Filipinos were reclassified as aliens, and the quota permitted to immigrate to the United States dropped to only fifty per year, even as the Philippines remained under the United States for a decade as part of the Commonwealth. Filipino soldiers joined the American forces to fight in WWII, but many did not receive veterans' benefits for their service. Still the number of Filipino immigrants has increased over time as the Philippines was the second largest origin nation for immigrants from 1990 until 2010 when India and China surpassed it.

India's story commences in earnest later, after 1965 when quotas were replaced by skills and family relationships as means to immigrate to the United States. Highly educated, Indian immigrants have become financially prosperous quickly. However, as South Asians, they too have confronted racism.

In the 21st century, American distrust of Asia is directed primarily towards China, an economic, military, and political rival for superpower status. The pandemic has brought tensions to a head. For one year, from January 23, 2020, when the coronavirus was first identified in Wuhan, until January 20, 2021 when President Trump departed the White House, the President insisted on calling Covid-19, the "China Virus." Every time he employed this term, he implied an anonymous, evil danger. This language reinforces stereotypes of "Yellow Peril"-style hordes, this time in the form of advancing, swirling droplets, and perpetuates prejudice towards Chinese, Chinese Americans, and Asians as a whole. In the past year, incidents against all Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, ranging from verbal harassment to physical assaults, have

surged in the United States. American deaths to Covid-19 now exceed the number of American soldiers killed in World War II and are expected to reach 600,000. Even with President Biden's recent directive to confront anti-Asian prejudice, tensions could continue to rise.

Did the overall concept of "Yellow Peril" end with Japan's surrender after World War II and postwar status as a key American ally or has it shifted to China? Based on the frictions today, the latter looks likely. What is additional evidence of a contemporary manifestation? A theme underlying the Asian experience in the United States is the subordinate place of Asian Americans in society. One depiction is the enduring custom of yellowface in performances that date from the late 19th century. White actors played Asian characters, who were usually depicted as sinister tyrants, exotic creatures, or absolute fools. Not only did yellowface eliminate an avenue for possible employment, but it also promoted negative images of Asians. Over time, these images perpetuated stereotypes. Yellowface is prevalent in the history of Hollywood. This behavior occurs in numerous Hollywood films across decades, such as *Madame Butterfly* (Olcott, 1915, United States), *Dragon Seed* (Bucquet, Conway, 1944, United States), *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Edwards, 1961, United States), and *Ghost In The Shell* (Sanders, 2017, United States). These films not only have actors in yellowface makeup, but also express anxieties about interracial encounters and the possibility of racial contamination. Fortunately, the Asian American community is advocating for itself more than ever before in countering yellowface, but the history of pernicious, enduring systemic racism is real.

Rupert Sanders' *Ghost in the Shell* (Sanders, 2017, United States) is a poor live-action adaptation based on the Japanese manga of the same name. Infamously known for its casting of an A-list celebrity, Scarlett Johansson as well as a predominantly Caucasian cast, Sanders' adaptation comes off as accommodating and appealing to a Western audience as an illustration of

the white-savior complex. The white savior complex, according to Yusuf Jailani, stems from the belief among Westerners that “they are more advantaged than people in other parts of the world.” (Jalini 53) Rather than remaining true to the franchise’s Japanese origins, Sanders portrays his Caucasian cast (with the exception of Kitano Takeshi) as heroes in the film, the ultimate “good guys.” By depicting his majority Caucasian cast as such, he accommodates the Western audience, giving into the white-savior complex and its “impression of privilege, although justifiable, has gradually paved the way for a sense of Western superiority. [...] Westerners seek to ‘liberate’ less privileged people and societies in other parts of the world by acting on their behalf” (Jalini 53).

## COMMON THEMES

### FAMILY

Family is often seen as a core part of a person’s life. How does one define family? Is family only established by blood or can the idea be extended to friends? According to Evelyn Nakano Glenn, “historical and contemporary snapshots of gender, sexual, and generational dynamics [...] reveal the flexibility of the family and the creativity of Asian Americans in fashioning their relationships and households to help them navigate their lives in America” (Glenn 92). This opening portion of film analysis not only explores what family means in different types of households but also the intricate dynamics that exist between family members and generations. Family establishes a person's identity and trajectory. Through coming of age shows like *Fresh Off The Boat* (2015) and *Never Have I Ever* (2020), emotionally appealing movies like *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), *Searching* (2018), *The Farewell* (2019), *Ms. Purple* (2019), *Monsoon* (2019), and *Flower Drum Song* (1961), comedy-drama films like *3 Idiots*

(2009), and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), critically acclaimed movies like *Parasite* (2019), *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), and *Train to Busan* (2016), and animated short films like *Wind* (2019) and *Bao* (2018), this section pinpoints family behavior, conflicting beliefs between different generations, and the characteristics of Asian and Asian American households.

### **Flower Drum Song**

Henry Koster's *Flower Drum Song* (Koster, 1961, United States), adapted from the 1958 Broadway musical, details the journeys of Mei Lin, a recent illegal immigrant from China; Sammy Fong, a nightclub boss; Linda Low, a showgirl at Sammy Fong's nightclub; and Wang Ta, Master Wong's son, trying to find love in their lives. The film emphasizes the dichotomy of two generations, the recent immigrant generation, from China to America in this case, and the generation that was born and brought up in the United States. Master Wong, who had immigrated to the United States, shares his distrust in the American way of life, including banks, slang, and the lack of respect for elders of the family. Wong Ta, Master Wong's eldest son, was born and brought up in the States, causing him to be more assimilated into the American society. His desire for the autonomy of dating and finding love for himself and Master Wong's belief in arranged marriages creates conflict not just within the family, but also within the lives of Mei Lin and her father. The family's generation gap, as well as the integration of Chinese values and customs into American society, is depicted through various songs. "The Other Generation" features Master Wong and his youngest son. Master Wong dons traditional attire, while his youngest son dresses completely in baseball attire. Their clothing serves as a visual showcase of the stark difference between their generations. Not only does the song feature contrasting costumes, but the lyrics also emphasize the lack of understanding each generation has regarding the other. Interestingly, Ta isn't featured in the song, even though he was born and brought up in

the United States. Despite holding different beliefs from his father, Ta's exclusion from the song creates a perception of Ta being the outlier, creating a middle ground between the two contrasting generational values. Additionally, Ta's absence foreshadows the ending of the movie. It justifies his role as a middle ground because not only is his marriage to Mei Lin approved by Master Wong as an arranged marriage at the beginning of the film but also because Ta eventually marries her out of his love for her.

### **The Joy Luck Club & Fresh Off The Boat**

Wayne Wang's *The Joy Luck Club* (Wang, 1993, United States) focuses on the fraught relationships between four pairs of mothers and daughters, and the lessons they reaped from their lives. The lessons each daughter learns stems from experiences in their mothers' lives. The dynamics of all four relationships are unique, leading to different lessons being passed onto each daughter. Similar to Amy Tan's novel by the same name, Wang's narrative film targets mothers and daughters as his target audience, attempting to relate the story to mothers and daughters who experienced differing cultures, respectively.

During Waverly's childhood, Lindo used her as a trophy to show off to the world how good a child she had, boasting of Waverly's exceptional chess skills. In turn, Waverly wanted to do everything she could to make Lindo proud of her, a mentality she kept into her adulthood. Consequently, Waverly is left conflicted between two worlds: one of a traditional world that focuses on making mother proud, and one of a Western world that focuses on pursuing love and passion. Through the dialogue, Wang reveals that Waverly had married and divorced a Chinese man, gave Lindo a granddaughter, and finally become engaged to a white man whom she loved. Owing, in part, to Waverly's inability to communicate her previous unhappiness to her mother, their relationship suffers as both parties remain unaware of each other's feelings. As a result of

Waverly's deviation from Lindo's expectations, their relationship appears more distant. Similar to Waverly's situation, Lindo had not communicated intimately with her own mother during her teenage years, resulting in a distanced relationship. However, before Waverly's wedding, Waverly and Lindo talk. As a result of that conversation, they reconcile and develop a stronger relationship. Through Lindo and Waverly's relationship, Wang conveys the importance of open and honest conversations with family members to ensure healthy relationships.

Ying Ying and her daughter Lena's stories focus on being stuck in a less than ideal marriage. Ying Ying's husband was abusive and adulterous, while Lena's was indifferent, leading to an empty marriage. Similar to Ying Ying's inability to find the confidence needed to leave her abusive relationship, Lena rationalizes her husband's lack of interest in their relationship. Despite their similar approaches to upsetting situations, Ying Ying inspires Lena to confront her unhappiness in her marriage and gives her the courage to figure out what she truly wants in life. Eventually, Lena gains the confidence to stand up and make demands to her husband, with her mother's help. Similar to Lindo and Waverly's experiences, Ying Ying and Lena's situations mirror one another. Wang brings out a mother's role in providing her daughter a guiding hand.

Before her marriage to Ted, Rose was high-spirited, fearless, and full of life. However, the pressures of being an ideal wife and conforming to a high-end lifestyle stripped her of her personality and made Rose a shell of herself. Because of Rose's change in personality, her relationship with Ted became hollow, pushing them to the verge of a divorce. Reflecting on her own mother's experience, An Mei provides Rose with the wisdom and the confidence to stand up for herself, leading to a reconciliation with Ted.

Suyuan and June's stories are interspersed throughout the movie. June, in her childhood, started to play the piano as a passion. However, seeing June's interest in piano, Suyuan made her participate in competitions to flaunt her talent to try and surpass Waverly's talent in chess. A culmination of similar experiences led June to believe that Suyuan's love was conditional only if she was good enough. The suppression of her frustrations towards Suyuan eventually leads to June breaking down to her mother. As a result, June is able to confidently tell her mother her honest thoughts of the worthlessness she experienced under her mother's eyes. In response, Suyuan is able to convey that her love for her daughter was unconditional, reconciling their uneasy relationship. In hindsight, June reflects on her relationship with Suyuan which leads to an appreciation for her mother.

Wang utilizes each mother-daughter pair to highlight the importance of family. By starting with each relationship as uneasy and evolving their relationships into loving ones, Wang emphasizes the importance of family to the Asian experience.

*Fresh Off the Boat* (Khan, 2015, United States), created by Nahnatchka Khan and adapted from Eddie Huang's memoir, depicts a family's adjustment to suburban Orlando, Florida after having recently moved from Chinatown in Washington, DC. This family comedy, broadcast on ABC, appeals to people of different ages across the country. The Huang family consists of the parents Jessica (Constance Wu) and Louis (Randall Park), their children -- Eddie, Evan, and Emery, and Louis' mother. The multigenerational Huang household reflects many Asian households.

The family dynamic is emphasized through Jessica's and Louis' actions and interactions. For instance, Jessica's sister, Connie, her husband, son, and Jessica's mother visit the Huangs in Orlando. The episode focuses on the rivalry between the sisters and their husbands, each

character showing off their financial success to one another. In addition, Jessica's and Connie's rivalry stems from wanting to impress their mother and become the favorite child.

The subtext, explained with the use of subtitles, reveals a conversation between Jessica and Connie and their competitive relationship. The sisters' spoken dialogue is the opposite of the subtitles that appear on the screen, where their conversation is civil and complimentary, while the subtext shows the exchanges of insults and criticisms. The episode ends with a resolution between Jessica and Connie. In this scene, the director makes use of the subtext again to portray the real meaning behind the conversation between Jessica and Connie. The subtext of the resolving conversation is polite while the spoken dialogue is an exchange of endearing insults ("Success Perm." *Fresh Off the Boat*, season 1, episode 4, Hulu, 2015. *Hulu*, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/a6791561-e7d6-4547-b0b9-096eb085ccaa>). Screenplay writers use irony for comedic monologues. The theme of sibling rivalry makes a reappearance in Episode 10 when Emery and Evan compete against one another in order to win the science fair and impress their mother ("Blind Spot." *Fresh Off the Boat*, season 1, episode 10, Hulu, 2015. *Hulu*, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/2dd05c93-b635-453e-b018-1895cfa51cb2>).

Throughout the series, the conflict and resolutions among the Huang family members depict family dynamics due to cultural differences between Taiwan and America. For example, the Huang's next-door neighbors are a Caucasian family. Honey, the young second wife of Marvin and stepmom to Marvin's teenage daughter Nicole, struggles with parenting. After receiving parenting advice from Jessica, Honey becomes strict, assertive, and controlling rather than trying to befriend her stepdaughter. A common Western approach to parenting is befriend one's child, eliminating the hierarchical parent-child relationship. Jessica views the strategy as ineffective; even if Jessica's aspirations and desires do not match her children's, she

believes she still has complete control over what they do and do not pursue (“So Chineez.” *Fresh Off the Boat*, season 1, episode 13, Hulu, 2015. *Hulu*, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/98c22d39-ee2e-4f8c-aef6-0707444ee3f6>). The series focuses on individual family members as well as the family dynamic. Despite each character presenting different personality traits, the Huangs portray an ideal, close-knit family.

Although *Fresh off the Boat* and *The Joy Luck Club* focus on family through a Chinese cultural lens, their approach to family differs drastically. Both employ the importance of learning lessons but use different methods to portray familial ties: one with humor and one with a more serious and intimate perspective. *Fresh off the Boat*'s reliance on humor makes it easier to digest and to avoid the negative aspects of family interactions. Throughout the series, the Huang family not only learns how to adapt but also appreciate one another as both a Chinese and American family. The show's writers choose to portray their adaptation through minor inconveniences with the Huang's day to day lives, often learning from one another or their worlds around them together. Sometimes the children help their parents learn certain American customs, and the parents help their children learn to appreciate being Chinese. *The Joy Luck Club*, on the other hand, focuses purely on a mother taking in her experiences in the past and applying them, and providing lessons to her daughter when she needs it. The mothers of *The Joy Luck Club* do not learn harsh lessons of the world from their children, but rather guide them while the daughters rely on and look up to their mothers regarding how to navigate through their problems.

### **Slumdog Millionaire**

Danny Boyle's coming-of-age film *Slumdog Millionaire* (Boyle, 2008, United States) follows Jamal Malik, an impoverished Indian-Muslim boy, from adolescence to adulthood. Throughout the film, Boyle chooses to concentrate on the importance of family through the

relationship between Jamal and his older brother, Salim. Through a series of flashbacks, Boyle develops a rocky relationship between the two. First, as playful boys to brothers who are stripped of innocence, forced to rely on one another for survival. Bounded by brotherhood and shared traumas, Salim looks out for Jamal after their single mother is murdered during the Bombay Riots. Salim is protective of his brother, showing his hesitation to welcome strangers like Latika, a young homeless girl, into the group. In addition, Salim is compelled to abandon Latika in order to help his brother first. Despite finding wealth in a life of crime, Salim's territorial nature protected Jamal by ensuring a fate without slums and poverty. Jamal and Salim's relationship is everything but perfect, yet both come to find solace in one another despite their different outlooks on life. Viewing the world as cruel and unforgiving, Salim makes decisions that evoke a sense of distrust in Jamal. Despite Salim's amoral behavior, Jamal continuously returns to his brother's side every few years. Jamal's motivation for locating Salim and Latika reveals his desire for human connection.

### **3 Idiots**

*3 Idiots* (Hirani, 2009, India), by award-winning director Rajkumar Hirani, portrays the non-blood brotherhood between three engineering students. Told in a non-linear manner, the film focuses on both the present and the past lives of Raju, Farhan, and Rancho, and their journey through cut-throat academia. The friends rely on and support one another, forming an unbreakable bond that mimics familial closeness. Each character finds himself in ironic situations (presumably for comic relief) and serious dilemmas threatening his physical and mental health and future success. The audience watches the characters develop from students to professionals, and their willingness to make sacrifices along the way for each other at the cost of their own wellbeing. Instances of selfless acts include: Rancho saving Raju's father from a life-

threatening health scare, and Farhan and Raju clearing their work schedules to find Rancho after years of losing touch. Without expecting anything in return, the characters provide services and favors for one another out of love and admiration.

For example, Raju finds himself in a compromised position when the film's antagonist Virus - a strict, unaccommodating, rigid professor - makes him choose between expelling Rancho or writing to his father in regards to his own expulsion. Unable and emotionally unfit to make a decision, Raju attempts suicide, rather than betray Rancho and let down his family. Raju's failed suicide attempt and lengthy recovery unearths Rancho's compassion and support for Raju. Farhan also hastens Raju's recovery with daily visits to the hospital and good humor. This scene touches on the risk of untreated mental health and the importance of companionship.

### **Train to Busan**

*Train to Busan* (Yeon, 2016, South Korea), directed by Yeon Sang-ho, is a horror, thriller, action zombie film that initially takes place in Seoul, South Korea. In the midst of a zombie outbreak, a father and daughter journey to Busan in an effort to see the daughter's mother post-divorce. The audience watches a quick-spreading infection impact an array of characters with different personalities, ages, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Most of the film is shot on a train or in train stations, limiting the environment to an everyday public transport setting. Sang-ho's choice to film in a confined environment immerses the audience into the film and encourages a connection to certain characters. Viewers witness how a life-threatening event brings out the best and worst traits in characters, where some only fend for themselves and others make sacrifices for those around them. In Seok-Woo's case, he is initially portrayed as an aloof, workaholic father who shows little interest in his young daughter's life and interests. By the end

of the film, Seok-Woo evolves into a selfless, caring hero who not only does everything he can to protect his daughter, but also those around him, like a pregnant woman.

### **Crazy Rich Asians**

Hollywood's beloved romantic comedy, *Crazy Rich Asians* (Chu, 2018, United States), directed by Jon M. Chu, covers family dynamics and the Chinese diaspora, and is an ostentatious display of wealth, particularly in Singapore. Rachel Lu (Constance Wu) and Nick Young's (Henry Golding) love withstands the test of Nick's mother Eleanor (Michelle Yeoh) and traverses socioeconomic class tensions and cultural differences between America and China. Wealth -- particularly old money, status, cultural capital, and education are heavily valued by the Young family and their social circle. Eleanor disapproves of Rachel providing for her single immigrant mother with her income as an economics professor. The pressure to marry within one's caste to uphold the family name forces Nick to move to the U.S. to escape the weight of his household's expectations.

In a culminating scene, Rachel plays a strategic game of Mahjong while sitting in the chair facing the West, and Eleanor, sitting in the chair to the East, plays a game of Mahjong. To attain Eleanor's attention and respect, Rachel plays the strategic game, putting her on the path to victory. Many viewers perceived this artful scene as Rachel winning, thus, displaying her worth and knowledge to Eleanor. Those who understand the game of Mahjong would know that Rachel, in fact, loses purposely to Eleanor in order to show her why she rejected Nick's proposal. Rachel understands that family comes first, allowing Eleanor to win the rigged game. This key moment shows the evolution of Rachel's character and the cultural gap between Western and Eastern society. Yet, in a typical, Westernized, Hollywood ending, Rachel

ultimately gets engaged to Nick. Jon M. Chu's choice to end the movie the way he did creates excitement and potential for a sequel.

## **Searching**

With a budget of less than one million dollars, Aneesh Chaganty executed *Searching* (Chaganty, 2018, United States), a memorable thriller in which David Kim (John Cho) desperately searches for his missing adolescent daughter, Margot. After suffering the loss of Margot's mother, David becomes a single father, dedicated to his daughter's success while trying to keep the family afloat by filling the role of two parents. After Margot goes missing, the viewer watches David grow increasingly worried about the safety of his daughter while coping with the loss of his wife. The audience develops compassion and empathy for each character.

The use of technology plays an essential role in the film, making it a 21st-century story with an Asian American leading protagonist. Shot primarily on the desktop of a laptop, the audience follows David's efforts to find Margot through screen sharing, FaceTime, web searches, videos of testimonies, security footage, social media, and text messages. In moments where David is idle or away, the audience reads his unanswered text messages, missed phone calls, and Margot's pleas for help the night she disappeared. The limited setting and lack of camera work confines the viewer to one space, forcing one to be present to catch every detail on screen. Witnessing David panic as he anxiously scrolls, types, and searches for answers reflects exactly what the viewer is feeling while watching the film. The viewer and David are seemingly investigating Margot's disappearance together, experiencing similar emotions of dread, anxiety, and confusion.

After an emotional journey, David finds Margot. Their father-daughter relationship strengthens after the event, showing how the characters overcome a troubling time and ultimately

succeeding. For instance, David supports Margot's pursuit of piano in college. The unconditional love David has for Margot is portrayed through a minor computer camera. Chaganty's film challenges the idea that not all movies with non-white actors have to be about cultural heritage, immigration, and racial tension. *Searching* (2018) is simply an American thriller about family without highlighting the Korean American experience.

### **Bao (Pixar) & Wind (Pixar)**

Domee Shi's *Bao* (Shi, 2018, United States) is an animated Pixar short film focusing on the aspects of the intergenerational gap between families. The film focuses on the journey of a Chinese Canadian mother who raises a bun child that represents her real son. Despite enjoying spending time with their mother, the real son and the bun child eventually leave her for the appeal of a more "free" lifestyle. After multiple failed attempts, she eats the bun, regrets it, and cries in her bed. Her real son then appears and they share a snack that they shared in the son's childhood. The film accurately portrays the divide in opinions between two generations. The mother is portrayed to be overprotective towards her son. For example, she doesn't allow him to play soccer or is upset by him wanting to spend time with his friends. This presents the emotional side of tiger parenting, emphasizing the mother's unwillingness to let her son live his life. Another central theme in the film is portraying food as a means to establish a connection between families and people. When the bun is upset at the mother, she cooks him a lavish meal as a means to apologize for not letting him play soccer. When the real son returns, he brings the snack he and his mother shared in his childhood as a means to make amends and reconnect with her. In addition, the last scene of the film is the real son, his fiancée, and the parents making buns together. Food, especially nostalgic foods, serve as a connecting thread for the relationships.

Food is essential to any culture and having niche food -- baozi, in a foreign country (Canada) -- is an essential part of having a connection to not just community but also roots.

Edwin Chang's animated Pixar short film *Wind* (Chang, 2019, United States) focuses on the sacrificial nature of a family. Chang introduces a grandmother and her grandson who are trapped in a bottomless hole. The family's goal is to build a rocket in order to escape. The grandson realizes that there is only one seat in the rocket, leading to his grandmother reassuring him that he should leave the hole first and then pull her out of the hole. His grandmother's reassurance gives him the courage to follow through with the plan. This symbolizes how immigration to a new country for better opportunities or getting out of dangerous circumstances often requires a generation to sacrifice itself or its needs and wants to help the next generation. In an interview with ABC News, Chang talks about how the film represents the sacrifices his grandmother had to make in order to allow for his father to come to the United States from Korea (Myers). A noticeable lack of dialogue represents how immigrating from oppressive regimes, like North Korea, is done quietly because the regime doesn't want anyone to leave.

Pixar's animated short films, *Wind* (Chan, 2019, United States) and *Bao* (Shi, 2018, United States), focus on different aspects of family. Yet, they have the same target audience. Since both are animated films, their primary target audience is children. However, the concepts and metaphors in the films make them meaningful to audiences of all ages. While the films provide entertaining stories for children, they represent deep concepts like sacrifice and empty nest syndrome for a more mature audience. To children, *Wind* simply may be about a family escaping from a hole and *Bao* may be a story about a mother and son. However, mature viewers can understand how the hole in *Wind* is a metaphor for North Korea and the relationship between the mother and bun as empty nest syndrome in *Bao*.

## **The Farewell**

Lulu Wang's *The Farewell* (Wang, 2019, United States) follows a Chinese American, Billi Wang (Awkwafina), as she travels back to China in preparation for her grandmother's inevitable death. Billi helps her family shield Nai Nai's diagnosis from her, despite seeing it as unethical. Although lying about a cancer diagnosis is portrayed as extremely common in Chinese culture because "it isn't cancer that kills. It's the fear," Billi is opposed to it initially due to her American upbringing, which focuses on individuality. Lulu Wang brings out the duplicit role in the Chinese's interpretation of loving your family: do you tell them the truth or protect them because you love them? The family emphasizes that their lie, in an attempt to protect Nai Nai, comes from their love for her. However, Billi constantly questions the moral reasoning behind the lie, preferring to be honest with Nai Nai's diagnosis. Through the film's dialogue, Wang reveals that Billi is willing to stay back in China in order to help Nai Nai during her final days. As a result, Billi displays her true love and dedication to her grandmother, emphasizing the important role of family in Asian households. In addition, Wang, through the depiction of post-death rituals for Ye Ye (Billi's grandfather), conveys the idea that one doesn't stop being considered a part of the family after death. It emphasizes that familial bonds and connections defy death and the concept of mortality. Billi's regular communication with Nai Nai, despite being thousands of miles apart, shows how influential Nai Nai's positive presence was in Billi's childhood. Moving to the States, without Nai Nai, stripped her off of Nai Nai's physical presence, abruptly leading to emotional trauma.

## **Ms. Purple**

Set in Koreatown, Los Angeles, *Ms. Purple* (Chon, 2019, United States) follows 23-year-old Kasie (Tiffany Chu) and her life as a karaoke bar hostess and her father's caretaker. In order

to make ends meet, Kasie takes up the role as the matriarch of the family, making her father's health and uniting her family top priorities. As a female Asian American, Kasie faces and endures abandonment, misogyny, and objectification. The movie also highlights the American Dream Tax, the idea that one must pay to gain access to new opportunities as the cost of one's livelihood. In Kasie's case, she drops out of music school to tend to her terminally ill father and cover his medical expenses.

The film's director, Justin Chon, uses flashbacks to show what life used to be like for Kasie and her older brother, Carey. The single-parent, lower-middle-class household in which Kasie and Carey grew up in is far from perfect. Stylistically, the juxtaposition between Kasie's childhood memories involving her father and her present life exemplifies Kasie's respect for her father and his devotion to her. Despite Carey's rocky relationship with his father, Kasie brings them back together, mending the father-son relationship. *Ms. Purple* (2019) is an unconventional take on the Asian American narrative due to its lack of Asian tropes. Kasie is a relatable character that does not fit the model minority mold. Her experiences, emotions and life-changing decisions make her well-rounded and human. The conclusion is raw, authentic, and not particularly uplifting, making the overall film similar to real-life circumstances.

### **Parasite**

*Parasite* (Bong, 2019, South Korea), directed by Bong Joon-ho, focuses on the story of the poor Kim family who deceive the opulent Park family in an attempt to secure jobs. The film portrays the theme of family unity by seamlessly depicting the integration of the Kim family in the Park family household. Once Ki-woo is hired as an English tutor at the Park household, due to his friend's recommendation, he works with his family in order to secure jobs for his entire family. Bong illustrates how the Kim family manages to integrate themselves into the household

sequentially through lies and deception. Beginning with Ki-woo and concluding with his mother, Chung-sook, the family of four manages to become enlisted by the Parks. The processes of hiring Ki-taek and Chung-sook are montages, edited seamlessly with non-diegetic melodious music. These montages create an audibly and visually appealing transition between the Kim family being unemployed and poor to being employed by the Park household, which represents the allure of working at the Park family home. The film also presents the idea of family being one's first and foremost priority. In the climax scene when Da-song is suffering from a seizure and Ki-jung is stabbed, Mr. Park ignores the stabbed Ki-jung and directs Ki-taek to drive them to the hospital immediately. However, since Ki-jung is Ki-taek's daughter, he decides to attend to Jessica instead of helping Mr. Park with Da-song, showing how both Mr. Park and Ki-taek prioritize their own families and disregard the others.

### **Monsoon**

Hong Khaou's *Monsoon* (Khaou, 2019, United Kingdom) follows the story of Kit, a British Vietnamese man who travels back to Vietnam for the first time in thirty years in order to spread his mother's ashes. Khaou approaches family in a way that focuses more on the disconnection between a loved one's postmortem. Throughout the film, Vietnam is used to represent Kit's relationship with both his childhood and family as he ventures through his homeland. Specifically, the memories Kit associates with Vietnam reminds him of his mother's life and a childhood changed by the Vietnam War. Through Kit's conversations with Lewis, a romantic interest, the audience gets a glimpse of his childhood and his father's detention at a reeducation camp, and the impact of the war on South Vietnam. This conversation later implies why Kit believes that his parents forbade the family from ever returning back to Vietnam. Throughout the film, Kit begins to reflect more on his relationship with his mother and the fond

memories he chooses to remember. As he travels from Saigon to Hanoi, he recalls his parents' lives and his emotions regarding his relationship with them. His parents' suffering and displacement from the Vietnam War ended up translating into generational trauma that ultimately affected Kit and his uneasy feelings about Vietnam. However, despite knowing his parents suffered through the war and their reasons for not coming back, Kit chooses to spread his mother's ashes in Vietnam as a way of bringing her home. Kit ends up conflicted by where his mother should rest: the pond behind his childhood home, Saigon, or his parents' home in Hanoi? Khaou illustrates the Asian experience of not only honoring family but remembering and understanding their lives. Ultimately, *Monsoon* chooses to highlight the importance of family spiritually and after death.

### **Never Have I Ever**

Mindy Kaling and Lang Fisher's coming of age comedy-drama, *Never Have I Ever* (Kaling, 2020, United States), follows the story of a teenage Indian American girl as she navigates through her adolescence. The television series emphasizes the theme of family is through multiple aspects. The role of family is portrayed by both an absent and tense relationship with parents, a complicated sibling relationship, and apprehension fulfilling familial duty. Mohan is first introduced as a parent who is more accepting of American customs (i.e. backyard gardens, neighborhood barbeques, mopeds, and Southern California sunshine), while Nalini is afraid and hesitant of accepting the Western culture. During the pilot episode, the series establishes the fact that Devi, the main character, begins the show without her father, Mohan, given his unexpected passing. Both Mohan's presence and absence in Devi's mind influences not only her character development but also the relationships she builds with her mother and others in her life. Despite his death, Devi is able to take his words of advice in spirit and conjure moments of comfort when

she feels discouraged and lonely. (“... had to be on my best behavior” *Never Have I Ever*, season 1, episode 9, Netflix, 27 Apr. 2020. *Netflix*, [www.netflix.com/watch/80179267](http://www.netflix.com/watch/80179267).) Devi’s memories of Mohan fill the empty void within her as she copes with a tumultuous relationship with her mother. In terms of Devi’s adolescent problems such as dating and self-confidence, Mohan’s spirit is able to provide her with the love and support she desperately yearns for from her mother.

Unlike Mohan and Devi’s relationship, Nalini and Devi’s relationship comes off as distant, cold, and contrarian. As their mother-daughter relationship deteriorates, Mohan’s presence becomes the only aspect that fills their emptiness. For Nalini, it’s spreading his ashes into the sea; for Devi, it’s the desire to gain an understanding with her parents, whether that was through Mohan’s spirit or her mother. Evident through Nalini’s praise and appreciation for Kamala, referencing her beauty and traditional practices (“Pilot” *Never Have I Ever*, season 1, episode 1, Netflix, 27 Apr. 2020. *Netflix*, [www.netflix.com/watch/80179267](http://www.netflix.com/watch/80179267).), she becomes the daughter she obviously wishes Devi were. As a result of Kamala’s upbringing in India and her recent immigration, she sustains her traditional roots and practices, something Nalini clearly wants of Devi instead of her current American roots. Due to this mixed perception, Nalini wanting Devi to be the perfect traditional Indian and Devi desiring to be the all-American teenager, their relationship fluctuates. Kaling highlights their fragile relationship in the near finale when Nalini fully projects her desire for Devi to become disciplined and traditional following a series of teenage misbehaviors. (“... had to be on my best behavior” *Never Have I Ever*, season 1, episode 9, Netflix, 27 Apr. 2020. *Netflix*, [www.netflix.com/watch/81128606](http://www.netflix.com/watch/81128606).) After Nalini’s declaration, Devi goes so far as to run away from home, representing their

shattered relationship. They only grow to understand one another when Nalini chooses to let go and scatter Mohan's ashes while Devi realizes the importance of the family in her life.

Kaling's *Never Have I Ever* (2020) addresses a sibling dynamic, specifically through Kamala (Devi's cousin) and Devi's relationship. Although she is Devi's cousin, Kamala is introduced as the epitome of perfection in Devi's life, representing the perfect elder sibling Devi is expected to emulate. Kamala is traditional and often shown being surprised by American pop culture and ways of life. As a result of their conflicting personalities, Kamala and Devi end up having a love/hate relationship. Established in the aforementioned paragraph, Kamala's recent immigration, upbringing in India, and appreciation for traditional Indian culture changes Nalini's perception of Kamala which puts her on a pedestal as the dream daughter. Kamala's perfection and Nalini's response further strengthen the sibling rivalry that affects Devi's overall opinion of Kamala. Through Nalini's contrasting treatment of Kamala and Devi, she is seen being more lenient towards Kamala, often dismissing or accepting of Kamala's mistakes in comparison to Devi's. For example, when Kamala was caught with her boyfriend during a family meeting of her future husband in comparison to Devi's night with Paxton, Nalini reacted more positively towards Kamala than Devi. ("... had to be on my best behavior" *Never Have I Ever*, season 1, episode 9, Netflix, 27 Apr. 2020. *Netflix*, [www.netflix.com/watch/81128606](http://www.netflix.com/watch/81128606).) In addition, Kamala's older age allows Nalini to be more lenient whilst her reaction to Devi's parallel relationship comes off as harsh, most likely due to her younger age. Kaling uses Nalini's reaction to represent an obvious sibling dynamic between the two pairs. As a result, Kamala comes to embody the image of the perfect and ideal elder sibling while Devi is seen as a young delinquent within the family.

Although Kamala is seen as the “perfect Indian daughter,” the person Devi should become, she is left with her own personal discord between one of fulfilling her familial duty versus chasing her own romantic passion. Similar to the sibling dynamic, Kamala is left to mold into the epitome of tradition and perfection. Throughout the series, Kamala is seen as conflicted between accepting her arranged marriage, chasing Steve, or coming to terms with what she really wants with her life. Kamala is seen already dedicating some time and interest in her boyfriend Steve before breaking it off in order to fulfill her familial duties. It’s only when Devi introduces her to a teenage soap opera, *Riverdale*, that she becomes inspired to chase her passion over her family’s desire, a western approach to a romantic partnership. (“... gotten drunk with the popular kids” *Never Have I Ever*, season 1, episode 3, Netflix, 27 Apr. 2020. *Netflix*, [www.netflix.com/watch/81128601](http://www.netflix.com/watch/81128601).) She then begins to question that approach and begins to think about her familial duty more carefully when she meets a woman ousted by the Indian community for marrying a Muslim man, something against the woman’s family’s wishes. (“... never felt so Indian” *Never Have I Ever*, season 1, episode 4, Netflix, 27 Apr. 2020. *Netflix*, [www.netflix.com/watch/81128600](http://www.netflix.com/watch/81128600).) Kamala’s story arc concludes when she is able to put her foot down and accept the fact that she’s not ready for marriage, choosing to reject Steve’s proposal and confessing to Prashant her issue with being engaged. Fortunately, for Kamala, Prashant reciprocates that feeling.

## CONCLUSION

*Train to Busan* (2016) and *Parasite* (2019), both foreign films, portray the concept of family in a different way than those produced in the United States. *Train to Busan* and *Parasite* portray various family units in conflict with the outside factors, zombies, and social structure, respectively. The portrayal of family from an American perspective, in films like *Flower Drum*

*Song and Searching*, comes off as more intimate, focusing on family issues within the clan rather than a family as a unit with external factors as a source of conflict.

## PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

### **Nyaari Kothiya**

My family has played a very important role in my life. When I moved to the United States, I called my parents every day after school to tell them about my day. They would stay up till 1-2 am IST (Indian Standard Time) just to talk to me about my day. They have gotten me through extremely difficult times in my life. However, there are times when even now, I have conflicts with them because I feel like I am “too American.” I still tend to go the “Indian” route for things where I ask for the approval of my parents for decisions I make. I know they appreciate that but there are disagreements where I stand my ground. My mom tells me how she had warned my father about me not potentially agreeing with him after I went to the United States. Despite any disagreements, I am confident that my parents will always stand by me. After I got into Hamilton and started going to college there, I have felt the concept of my Hamily (Hamilton Family) come into the spotlight. I don’t call my parents every day now, but I have my Hamilton friends and professors as my family. Like any family, there may be disagreements but at the end of the day, I love both my family and my Hamily.

### **Jason Le**

Like many Asian American kids, I grew up without hearing my parents saying the words “I love you.” To me, their form of “I love you” was a “good job” whenever I brought home straight A’s. Their apologies came in the form of sliced apples, watermelons, and oranges in a tiny bowl. When watching television shows or rom-com movies where Western parents would tell their kids: “Love you, son!” or “You’ll get em’ next time, sport!” whenever a loss or obstacle

occurs. What baffles me the most were the hugs, kisses, and the words: “I’m sorry,” when they were in the wrong. In hindsight, I am able to understand their subtle expressions of love but it doesn’t excuse the fact that I grew up with associations of being this perfect kid, a carbon cut copy of my sister to be exact, in order to be deserving of love. In my mind, their love was always conditional.

I grew up close to my grandparents. For a couple of years, my grandma raised me herself. My sister and I spent weekdays after school with my grandma, often playing with toys and eating lunch and dinner meals with her. She would play with us and make fun of me for always carrying my teddy bears everywhere I went. When we moved to Texas, my mom thought it was best for my grandma to come live with us since my grandpa died a few years before. Despite my grandma having a hard time keeping up with a couple of kids, she still managed to walk me to school and home every day, cook my sister and I meals, and walk up the stairs, despite her weakened legs, in order to tuck me into bed. My grandma always expressed her love for me, more so than my parents’ subtle attempts.

A few years later, my cousins from Vietnam decided to move in with the rest of our family. Soon, we had fifteen people living under the same roof in Texas, the perfect example of a generational home. As a result of this crowded situation, I ended up sharing a bedroom with my cousin and sister for a good decade. We hardly had dinner together as an entire family since it was separated to children’s dinner time versus adult dinner time following the workday. Despite the separate schedules, we always ate together as half family, one way or another. The system was weird but that’s how we functioned with a massive household.

**Anna Sakamoto**

I was born and raised in Tokyo, Japan to a Jewish American mother and a native Japanese father. I spoke English at home and attended regular Japanese school, as opposed to international school, from age four to seven where I developed a native Japanese tongue. My mom, fluent in Japanese, lived in Japan for seventeen years after graduating from college. She married my dad and eventually had my older brother in 1996. From kindergarten through fifth grade, my brother was teased and excluded by his classmates for being “hafu” or “half.” Before starting first grade at my brother’s public elementary school, I mentally prepared myself to face the same torment he would cry to my mom about after school. To say the least, I did not prepare myself enough.

My dad’s work transfer came around only three months after I began elementary school. My family packed up our beloved house and moved to Honolulu, Hawaii, only planning on staying for three years before moving back to Japan. Now, fourteen years later, my mom and I remain in Honolulu, still baffled by our experiences leading up to this point. Although I lost a father figure in the process, my relationships with my mom and brother remain indestructible. I am delighted to call Hawaii my home.

## TRANSITION

Transitioning to a new environment is described as getting accustomed to the unknown setting. Many Asian immigrants, in the United States, go through the phase of transitioning to a new form of life in the United States and ultimately assimilating into the new society. The process of transitioning can be affected by various aspects that may or may not be in one’s control. Dramas like *Chan Is Missing* (Wang, 1982, United States) and *The Joy Luck Club* (Wang, 1993, United States) address assimilation into American society and the varying degrees

of success the characters experience. The action thriller, *New York* (Khan, 2009, United States), conveys not only transitioning into a new country but also to a volatile political climate.

### **Chan Is Missing**

Wayne Wang's *Chan Is Missing* (Wang, 1982, United States) follows Jo, a taxi driver in San Francisco, and Steve, Jo's nephew, and their journey to find Chan, a man who has their savings. The central figure in the film is the ambiguous character, Chan, who is introduced to the audience through various personal accounts by multiple characters. One of the central aspects of the film is the idea of transition and what it means to be a recent immigrant. It poses the question: how much should one adapt after immigrating to a new country? The film plays into the concept of either being "too Chinese," for a recent immigrant or being "too American" for an Asian American. While describing Chan, George said that he thinks Chan Hung is "too Chinese" alluding to his potential involvement and strong beliefs in the political conflict between Taiwan and mainland China (Wang 1:11:49). While describing himself, Jo says that he guesses he isn't "Chinese enough" to understand the mystery of Chan Hung and thus is refusing to accept the mystery without a solution (Wang 1:08:41). The various degrees of assimilation into American society is portrayed through numerous scenes and characters. There are people that, despite being in the United States, have strong loyalties and beliefs regarding the conflict between mainland and Taiwan, Chinese/Chinese American people at the senior center that enjoy dancing to Spanish music, and the recent immigrants trying to fully assimilate and adapt to American values. The film ends with Jo's voiceover monologue describing Chan Hung as:

"Mr. Lee says Chan Hung and immigrants like him need to be taught as if they were children. Mr. Fong thinks anyone who can invent a word processing system

in Chinese must be a genius. Steve thinks that Chan Hung is slow but sly when it comes to money. Jenny thinks that her father is honest and trustworthy. Mrs. Chan thinks her husband is a failure because he isn't rich. Amy thinks he is a hot headed political activist. The old man thinks Chan Hung is just a paranoid person. Henry thinks Chan Hung is patriotic and has gone back to the mainland to serve the people. Frankie thinks Chan Hung worries a lot about money and his inheritance. He thinks Chan Hung is back in Taiwan, fighting with his brother over the partition of some property. George thinks Chan Hung is too Chinese and is unwilling to change. Presco thinks he's an eccentric who likes Mariachi music." These complicated and contradictory descriptions of Chan Hung lead Jo to comment "here is a picture of Chan Hung but I still can't see him" (Wang 1:10:55)

The complicated aspect of Chan's characters represents the diversity and complex traits of the Chinese American community. Chan is meant to stand in as a representation of the uniqueness and intricately intertwined aspects of the Chinese American community. Wang's inclusion of the monologue is meant to emphasize how impossible it is to categorize the Chinese American community. By the same token, Wang's monologue serves as a way to encapsulate the diversity and uniqueness within the community. Wang's choice of the title, *Chan Is Missing*, then can be interpreted as it is not Chan, the character, who is missing but rather, the perfect description of the Chinese American community that is missing. Interestingly, the film lacks color and is black and white. By choosing to deprive the audience of the visual variety that

comes with color, Wang effectively creates a contradiction with the message he attempts to convey regarding diversity within the Chinese American community.

### **The Joy Luck Club**

One of the most prominent themes present in Wayne Wang's *The Joy Luck Club* (Wang, 1993, United States) is the aspect of transitioning from one identity to another. Specifically, the transition between an Asian identity to that of an Asian American identity highlighted by the film's alternation between the stories of mothers and their respective daughters. Wang's film takes a nonlinear approach to storytelling, relying on flashbacks while setting the present-day scene at a party reunion of friends and family of, and including, the members of the Joy Luck Club. With each flashback, the audience witnesses the stories of the mothers and their lives in China with stories of their daughters afterward. Typically, the stories of the mothers highlight an important lesson which is then represented in their daughters but altered to take on the perspective of an Asian American. The mothers experience their own various hardships to a certain degree. However, we resonate the most with one particular pair and thus, are choosing to focus on that specific mother-daughter relationship: Lindo and Waverly.

Throughout Lindo's, the mother's flashback, the audience is forced to watch her grow up, from childhood to teenage years, and abandoned by her family due to the inevitability of an arranged marriage to a stranger embedded into a predetermined destiny.. The goal of Lindo's arranged marriage was to produce her husband and his family a male heir, something for years she could not do alongside being in a passionless marriage with him and abusive in-laws. Societal and familial expectations pressures their marriage to be solely for the benefit of fulfilling her mother's wishes while producing a male heir for her husband's family, evident through Lindo's physical and emotional abuse by her husband's family. Wang focuses on

bringing Lindo's hardships of experiencing the backward and patriarchal nature of marriage systems and the relentless emotional abuse of wives in China to life and for the eyes of a Western foreigner or a modern person. Lindo's exploitation of cultural superstition allows her to maneuver her way out of the abusive and loveless marriage. Presenting the audience with the lessons Lindo has learned during her life, Wang shifts and transitions this experience from the mother to daughter, Waverly, an Asian American. Similar to Lindo's arranged marriage, Waverly's discourse with her marriage stemmed from doing what she thought would make her mother proud. Waverly's experience isn't portrayed as a traditional arranged marriage, yet she adopts elements of it through marrying a Chinese man, associating that marriage with her mother's pride and satisfaction. Despite Waverly's situation differing drastically from those of her mother's, the lesson remains the same and is told through problems experienced by Asian Americans. For this family, there is a distinction between duty and passion. Both Lindo and Waverly chose passion as they transcend through an odyssey of fulfilling one's duty. By presenting Lindo and Waverly's stories simultaneously, the filmmaker displays one of the traditions upheld in China and the other of an Asian American.

### **New York**

The Indian action-thriller, *New York* (Khan, 2009, United States), directed by Kabir Khan, tells the story of three friends who meet at an American university. Omar, a newly-transferred international student from Delhi, meets Maya, an Indian American student who grew up speaking Hindi with her mother. Maya takes Omar under her wing to ease his transition, acclimating him to American culture and college life. Samir, a good friend of Maya, befriends Omar, and the three students become a tight-knit group. Towards the end of their college experience, 9/11 occurs causing a political, societal, and cultural shift for each character.

Told through a nonlinear technique using flashbacks and flashforwards, the film highlights how the U.S. government dealt with the aftermath of 9/11 by detaining over a thousand Arab and Muslim men living in the states prior to the attack. Prejudice against Muslims, racial profiling, and post-traumatic stress restrict Omar and Samir to transition smoothly into a newly hostile society.

The two points of transition in the film contradict one another where Omar's initial transition into America is full of optimism and being accepted by those around him. The subsequent transition includes Omar, Samir, and Maya's adjustment to the new political climate, unable to live normal lives as people of color. Geographic, cultural, and societal changes perpetuate a change of identity.

## CONCLUSION

Each film tackles various aspects of transitioning to a new country. *Chan Is Missing* (1982) attempts to portray the journey of a community, specifically the Chinese immigrant community. It highlights the individuality of the process of transitioning to the United States, and the failure to generalize the journey to a community. *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) focuses on the intergenerational transition within a family by showcasing the stories of mothers and daughters. *New York* (2009) illustrates how transition is a constant process that can be affected by external factors, such as political climate.

## PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

### **Nyaari Kothiya**

When I moved to the United States, I went through a phase where I wanted to transition quickly to being a "typical American teenager." Based on the people I knew in my school, it meant forgetting some of my roots and being "whitewashed." Retrospectively, I firmly believe

that I was on the path to be “whitewashed.” However, my best friend, Nicole, and mentor through high school, Mrs. McKenna, provided me with the confidence to be who I was. They made me realize that I didn’t need to fit in. They helped me recognize that my background was what made me unique. In addition, during my early days in the United States, I was so afraid of speaking in English because I was extremely afraid of judgment. For a solid month in school, I refused to speak up in class until called on by my teachers. It certainly took time to be confident to speak English in America, despite the fact that I had gone to an English school in India. I am at the point in my life where people are shocked when they find out that I wasn’t born in the US because I “don’t have an accent at all.” Interactions like that make me second guess if I have transitioned too much and if I have forgotten certain parts of my identity. I still consider myself to be going through a dormant transition, despite having been in the US for more than 4 years. I find myself surprised by certain aspects of American life that I continually find myself adapting to.

### **Anna Sakamoto**

The majority of the population in the state of Hawaii is Asian and mixed race. The state is multicultural due to its location in the Central Pacific, history of immigration from Asia, and native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander population. Growing up in a place as beautiful as Honolulu for the remainder of my childhood was a blessing. As a child, my transition from Japan to the U.S. was seamless. I found a community that embraced my mixed roots. No one perceived me as strange, foreign, or unattractive. I was normal, and, frankly, that is all I wanted as a child and teenager. The transition from Japan to Oahu was needed, and I could not imagine having stayed in Japan and being the same person I am today. Living in Hawaii has solidified my deep appreciation for Japan despite my negative memories. My transition into rural Clinton, NY was

not as smooth as my first geographic transition. Since I have never lived within a predominantly white community, I have had to acclimate to the lack of racial and cultural diversity, in addition to the absence of Asian food and city crowds.

## AMERICAN DREAM

The American Dream is built on a foundation and idea that anyone, no matter the class or creed, can reach their own success through hard work and sacrifice. Despite facing adversities (i.e. discriminations in the form of xenophobia, homophobia, or transphobia), accepting that it is a part of life will allow individuals to move forward and look for their own successes constructed by an American mold. Some entertainment media like *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004) and *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015) approach the American Dream with humor. While *New York* (2009), *Take Out* (2004), and *Who Killed Vincent Chin* (1987) examines the ideologies of the American Dream through a more serious and intimate tone. Despite the varying genres, these films survey the principles of the American Dream and its effect on not only Asian immigrants but also Asian Americans.

### **Who Killed Vincent Chin?**

Renee Tajima-Peña and Christine Choy's *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (Choy, Tajima-Peña, 1987, United States) covers the brief life and death of Vincent Chin, specifically his murder in the city of Detroit and the consequences following his death. Detroit as a city became "the automobile manufacturing center of the United States, and the auto industry dominated Detroit's economy." (Hyde 57) Although not strictly in Detroit but rather all over the United States, "Immigrants of all nationalities are competing for a scarce number of jobs in Los Angeles and Asians are easily identifiable targets of working-class anger." (Iino 24) Renee Tajima-Peña and

Christine Choy's *Who Killed Vincent Chin* (1987) examines the murder of Vincent Chin as motivated by anti-Asian sentiment caused by the decline of the auto-industry. The makers of the film establish the Chin family's reasoning for moving to the United States which was to achieve the American Dream. Vincent's father made an all-American move and joined the U.S. Army. His wife Lily Chin obtained a job doing laundry while Vincent had dreams of becoming an engineer in the booming auto industry. Lily Chin's testimony of adapting to American life and customs are contrasted with various images of the American Dream. As Lily Chin recounts the aggressions she faced as a Chinese immigrant, her experiences are contrasted with images of American pies, a happy family, baseball, and kids playing with toys -- the ideal of a suburban dream. By contrasting Chin's testimony with images of an American paradise, Tajima-Pena and Choy emphasize the idea that some people are destined to achieve the American Dream, while others are constantly put down on the playing field. Eventually, the auto-industry in Detroit began to decline and "for the industry's economic woes. "Buy American" campaigns soon morphed into ugly, malicious forms of anti-Asian racism, [...] This anti-Asian racism claimed the life of Vincent Chin and shamed a city and a nation." (Darden 155) Vincent Chin's death, just days before his wedding, killed his American Dream. Before Lily Chin was supposed to see her son fulfill his wishes, her American Dream was shattered by his murder. Chin's murder comes to embody the discriminatory nature of society's choice regarding who is able to achieve the American Dream.

### **Take Out**

Shih-Ching Tsou and Sean Baker's *Take Out* (Baker, Tsou, 2004, United States) focuses its narrative on the experiences of an illegal Chinese immigrant's daily life in the United States. Baker's choice of utilizing a cinematography style similar to that of a low-budget and

documentary-style film fosters a feeling of authenticity in regards to his protagonist's experience.

The plot of *Take Out* highlights the impossible goals of achieving the American Dream, illustrating that the system allows some to succeed but destines others to ultimately fail. The film's events are motivated by Ming's, the protagonist, goal to repay the money he owes loan sharks who he used to help to cover his family's debts and illegal immigration to the United States. Popular press has often reported on illegal immigrants from Latin America due to debates and legislation over the southern border of the United States. However, popular press media has often failed to cover immigration issues faced by Asian immigrants. Similar to many immigrants, Asian immigrants face issues with resettlement, adjusting to a different environment, and of course, the economic troubles needed to make money. Ming's immigration to the United States as well as the motivation of him and other Chinese characters is fueled by the ever perpetuating belief in the American Dream. It's heavily implied that Ming and his colleagues immigrated to the United States in search of a better life and success. While on a lunch break, Ming's colleagues talk about various ways they came to the United States, including illegally coming on a boat through California or being smuggled through Canada. Ma's, Ming's colleague, boat was "nabbed off the California coast," forcing him to apply for "political asylum" and "wait for a hearing" or the "next amnesty program." (Baker, Sean, Tsou, Shih-Ching director. *Take Out*. CAVU Pictures, 2004.) Baker's choice to highlight the difficulties of the immigration process, specifically for Asian immigrants, illustrates a desperation to pursue the American Dream.

However, the harsh reality is revealed through Ming's hard work and the lackluster outcome. Throughout the film, Ming races against the clock with the goal of making enough money to pay off the loan sharks through making deliveries and earning tips from customers.

Ming's task of making money, slowly chipping away at an unreasonable debt, epitomizes the endless cycle of achieving the American Dream. At the film's conclusion, Ming ultimately pays his dues for the night, thanks to money borrowed from a fellow chef, but his debt isn't cleared. After falling further into debt, he's able to keep the loan sharks at bay until they come for him again. Ming's efforts and ultimate outcome illustrates that the American Dream puts people into an endless cycle for a goal they can never achieve. However, despite this revelation, Asian immigrants are willing to chase this goal for the possibility of personal success.

### **Harold and Kumar Go To White Castle**

*Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle* (Leiner, 2004, United States), directed by Danny Leiner, is a stoner comedy film that plays on the trope of the American Dream. Specifically, the concept of hard work and only hard work will allow you to transcend through society's adversities and find success. The "success" of the American Dream defined by Harold and Kumar, at least to the extent of this film, is the exquisite White Castle burger. The White Castle burger, just like the American Dream's definition of success, should be easily obtainable in theory. However, in practice, the White Castle burger is just as difficult as trying to achieve upward mobility in a society that constantly sabotages a person.

Harold Lee and Kumar Patel are two Asian Americans, Korean American and Indian American, respectively. Harold is a hard-working accountant who has a mundane work life while Kumar is an academically well-achieving student who plans to go to medical school. Both characters appear unhappy with their destinies and want more, to find that gold mine of success: the American Dream. The quintessential American Dream definition of success for the two, imposed by their ambitions or expectations of others, is the careers they are supposed to achieve. However, the true definition of success, aside from reaching the White Castle burger joint, is to

find happiness and attain self-actualization. For Harold, shedding his submissive character and standing up for himself. Throughout the film, Harold's character and mindset develops after each mishap along the way to White Castle. By the end of the journey, Harold has shed his submissiveness and stands up to his white colleagues who have made a mockery of him time and time again. The audience watches Harold evolve from a stereotypical, obedient Asian trope to an assertive, confident, and risk-taking man. Kumar, after finishing a successful surgery, comes to realize that being a doctor was meant to be his destiny but it was the stereotype that held him back.

### **New York**

Kabir Khan's *New York* (Khan, 2009, India) frequently uses patriotic imagery of the United States juxtaposed with the three main characters. By frequently throwing in images of the American flag and metropolitan New York City, an iconic image of the American Dream, Khan informs the audience that this is the all-American city where Omar is destined to reach his dreams. Samir's capture of the American flag during a school race and the trio's reactions to the 9/11 attacks details their spiritual assimilation into the United States, illustrating the fact that they are, in a way, Americans not defined by citizenship. However, following the 9/11 attacks, these characters suffer through racial aggressions, specifically Samir. When Samir was racially profiled, arrested, and tortured for the color of his skin, his torturers, the American government, affirm that he's unwelcomed in the United States. Similar to his inability to properly integrate back into American society after suffering and appearing traumatized after his detention. He is able to achieve his "American Dream" of raising a family, owning a suburban home, and having an excellent job. However, by the same token, he is left broken and filled with hatred all due to

the color of his skin. Like Omar, despite being fully integrated into society, some people are left unwelcomed and destined to not be successful enough for their American Dream.

Agent Roshan's role in the film serves as a perfect example of how the American Dream is plainly difficult for some more than others. Throughout the events of the film, Roshan is often seen answering to a Caucasian superior who tends to put him down a lot. When interrogating Omar, Roshan is portrayed in a more powerful dynamic through alternating close-up shots between the two. Agent Roshan's close proximity to Omar backs him into a corner, giving him both the power and authority to get what he wants one way or another. However, Roshan's power dynamic switches when he answers to a Caucasian superior. His Caucasian superior is unable to understand his accent or pronounce Roshan's name correctly. As a result, the audience is forced to watch Roshan constantly accommodate his superior by reexplaining himself or allowing him to do whatever he wants. Thus is always being put down and restricted to answering to his Caucasian superior.

### **Life of Pi**

*Life of Pi* (Lee, 2012, United States), directed by Ang Lee, recounts the story of Piscine "Pi" Patel as he grows up in India and his journey as an adolescent lost at sea. Unlike the traditional elements of an immigration story, Lee tackles the theme of immigration through both a typical and primalistic approach of survival of the fittest. Pi and his family set off on a journey to go to Canada as an attempt to escape the economic and political crisis in India. Despite the family's choice to immigrate to Canada and not the United States, Lee still manages to highlight aspects of the American Dream. Specifically, Pi's family's desire to immigrate from an Asian country to a Western one mirrors the desire immigrants have in their pursuit for the American Dream. Similar to stories of immigrants, "Pi's mother [...] receives a racist reply [...] [Pi's father]

berates the chef, stating, "You can't speak to her that way. You're just a cook!" But despite being merchant class and Western-educated, Pi and his family must face the reality of migration to the West: even uneducated lower-class whites are entitled to abuse them." In addition to Pi's family, the audience watches a "Taiwanese crewmember [...] flavors his white rice with tiny amounts of meat gravy to get through the long voyage [...] this scene foreshadows the impending moral concessions Pi must make in order to survive his journey to the New World." (Coe 28) Lee illustrates the difficulties of successfully immigrating to Western countries similar to the United States. Pi's family is left treated with hostilities and other immigrants, like them, are forced to adapt in order to survive. On Pi's journey to Canada, aboard a Japanese cargo ship, the rest of his family ends drowning as Pi becomes the sole survivor. Waking up on a lifeboat filled with various animals, they soon give in to their primal instincts and kill one another, leaving Pi alone with Richard Parker. This scene mirrors how some immigrants are successful in their immigration stories whilst others are left unsuccessful. Pi's survival and eventual arrival to his end destination, despite the difficulties, illustrates Pi's willingness to adapt and do whatever it takes to survive. Like the concept of the American Dream, the world tends to put down others and the only way to obtain upward mobility is to work hard and adapt to the given situation. Lee tackles the American Dream through his employment of literal survival of the fittest through initiative, adapt, and sacrifice in a tough situation. As a result, Lee is able to highlight the difficulties Asian immigrants, fueled by economic promises and survival, face as they are forced to strip themselves of their culture and comfortness in order to succeed as well as adapt to a situation that's already unfair.

### **Fresh Off The Boat**

One of the central themes of *Fresh Off The Boat* (Khan, 2015, United States) is Louis' pursuit of the American Dream which recurs throughout the series, more prominent in the first season. Louis, drained from working at Jessica's brother-in-law's furniture store in D.C., moves to Orlando to make his version of the American Dream come true in the form of a Western restaurant called "Cattleman's Ranch Steakhouse." His beliefs in the American Dream and the idea of working his way up to the top motivates him to achieve economic success and fulfillment. Louis does everything in his power to make his restaurant popular and prosperous. Variations of achieving the American Dream are also portrayed by the ability to afford and live in the suburbs. Although the restaurant initially struggles, Louis boosts business. For Jessica, part of achieving the American Dream is fitting in and befriending the white, middle class, suburban clique of female neighbors. Being accepted by a seemingly stable community of like minded individuals is an ideal that many people, including Jessica (and Eddie), want ("Pilot." *Fresh Off the Boat*, season 1, episode 1, Hulu, 2015. *Hulu*, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/3ecda132-7410-4403-849b-c06ba948dafd>).

A lot of the American Dream involves economic growth, success, and financial stability. By chance, Jessica relinquishes her hidden talent of making sales. She feels compelled to sell properties, eventually earning her realtor license and working for a real estate firm. Contributing to her family's financial stability, doing what she loves while also getting paid, and being skilled in a specific field give Jessica a greater purpose in life ("License to Sell." *Fresh Off the Boat*, season 1, episode 9, Hulu, 2015. *Hulu*, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/f4a426ff-b159-4551-9763-bd4ec3a3beac>). Another image associated with the American Dream is education, particularly higher education. Both Jessica and Louis attended an American university as Taiwanese immigrants.

In the last episode of the first season, the Huangs receive an invitation to join a country club - the “ultimate symbol of success” according to Louis and Jessica. During the process to convince Louis to join the country club, Jessica points out how the Huang family will be the first Chinese family to be members of the club. In response Marvin, says. “Sometimes I forget that you guys are Chinese.”

“You guys are just like regular old Americans to us,” Honey adds, catching Jessica’s attention, throwing her into a spiral of concerns of whether her family is Chinese enough. Fearing that her children will abandon and forget their cultural and ethnic roots, Jessica makes household changes in terms of interior design, sending her sons to Mandarin school, and making Chinese dishes for meals. She scolds her family for wearing shoes inside and attempts to reconnect everyone with their heritage. Despite her efforts, Jessica eventually accepts her appreciation for American culture, realizing that her family can still retain their Chinese roots. Balancing two cultures, languages, and mindsets is a struggle due to the desire to fit in and become the norm in order to be accepted in society. Feeling both included and distinct are two aspects of the American Dream Jessica desires and eventually realized she has. Jessica’s American Dream is not only financial and economical success, but also making sure that her family retains parts of their culture and doesn’t forget where they came from (“So Chineez.” *Fresh Off the Boat*, season 1, episode 13, Hulu, 2015. *Hulu*, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/98c22d39-ee2e-4f8c-aef6-0707444ee3f6>).

## CONCLUSION

The American Dream fosters the belief that anyone, regardless of socioeconomic background, ethnicity, or religion, is capable of finding their own success in the United States. However, the fallacy of the American Dream’s path to success can hinder personal growth as

individuals are sometimes forced to lose parts of themselves, consumed by this belief of endless hardwork for success. As a result, the American Dream comes off as biased with social factors, such as racism, influencing who can attain or lose their chances for success. Historically, racial biases can result in serious injury or death, evident through Vincent Chin's murder. While Detroit's auto industry began to decline, the "Buy American" campaign ultimately led to people associating the decline to Japan's auto industry. As a result, hostility towards people of Asian descent began to rise, Japanese or not. Like his mother, racial biases stripped Chin of his American Dream of becoming an engineer for the automobile industry. In order to obtain the American Dream, people are often left in a balancing act between integrating fully with American culture whilst still maintaining culture from home. Ultimately, success comes with sacrifice, one way or another.

## PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

### **Nyaari Kothiya**

The concept of the American Dream is one that I hold very near and dear to my heart. My uncle came to the United States in search of his American Dream. I decided to immigrate to the United States because I believed in the same principles. Although at that point in my life, I wasn't aware of the term "American Dream," I firmly believed that I could be anything I wanted to be in the United States. I visited the U.S. for a vacation and immediately decided that I wanted to live my life here. Within a year of my initial visit, I ended up going to high school in the U.S.. I appreciate the flexibility embedded in the American education system and still believe, to a lesser extent now though, that if I work hard enough, I will achieve my American Dream. To a certain extent, I feel that the idea of the American Dream has fueled my mom's journey to the States. She was a successful practicing dermatologist in India and made the extremely difficult

decision to leave everything behind to come to the United States. She has been working towards being an internal medicine doctor here for the last 2.5 years. My mom worked hard for two years to clear all her USMLE steps and now is applying for residency programs. Her journey, of working hard until she was at the place she wanted in life, is what still grounds my belief in the American Dream. I can't imagine a person my mother's age competing to get into a residency program in India. To me and my family, the mere fact that my mom has a chance of getting into a residency program at her age is enough to retain our belief in the American Dream. However, after spending so much time in the U.S., I do realize how flawed the concept of the American Dream is; yet I refuse to let go of the belief.

### **Jason Le**

My parents immigrated from Vietnam in search of the American Dream. In Vietnam, my parents grew up in tiny villages outside of Saigon and near the Cambodian border. My dad grew up as a farmer, raising his younger siblings on top of maintaining high grades for school. My mom was on the streets, selling items to American soldiers as an attempt to make money for food. After the war, my mom saw American soldiers and the United States as saviors. They fought alongside my grandpa and their people in South Vietnam, which further reinforced their belief that paradise was in the United States.

My mom came to the United States after former Senator John McCain sponsored my grandpa, a Southern Vietnamese soldier, and his family for their immigration to the United States. My dad came after my uncle got into the University of California in Los Angeles for medical school. They came into the United States at separate times, but both my parents had the same goal: to come to the United States and escape poverty. Starting off in California, my dad wanted to go into the U.S. Navy but was disqualified because he wasn't a permanent resident. By

the time he became a citizen, he had already found a career as an auto mechanic and an electronic technician. My mother gave up her dream of becoming a nurse in order to raise my older sister. Everyday, they worked, trying to make sure my sister and I have a better life than them. Rather than suffering through poverty and war, my parents worked hard everyday to give us the best opportunities they could. Rather than staying in California, my parents chose to move our family to Texas, where they could afford to buy us a warm home, comfortable clothes, and all the food we could ever want. Of course, my parents want to achieve more for us and would work until they die if it meant we could have a greater life.

A part of me still hopes in the American Dream, despite being aware of its fallacy. The American Dream motivated me to pursue opportunities of higher education, specifically through the QuestBridge program. I have hopes that my hard work will eventually pay off and that I am able to find my own definition of success and happiness. However, a part of me knows that my background as a low-income first-generation student puts me at a slight disadvantage compared to my peer network, at home and away.

### **Anna Sakamoto**

As a child, summer vacation was my interpretation of the American Dream. Every summer, my mom took my older brother and me back to her hometown in Massachusetts. For a couple of months out of the year, being surrounded by my Caucasian grandparents and extended family was something I cherished. Every moment spent swimming in the Atlantic Ocean, hearing the ice cream truck's signature tune in the distance, licking the sugary, artificial taste of blue Gatorade off my lips, playing American board games, and listening to early 2000s pop music on the radio filled my heart with nothing but comfort and longing - longing for how much I wanted to stay in the U.S. forever and not have to attend Japanese school.

Now, my American Dream consists of being a financially independent woman living in either New York City or Los Angeles. My American Dream has nothing to do with race anymore. I don't have a burning wish to be a white girl like I used to as a child. My mom would later describe my younger self as quiet, reserved, and lonesome. The only bright side of growing up with no friends in Japan is that I learned how to entertain myself. When not at school, I enjoyed playing and daydreaming in my pink bedroom. Even though I did not know how to read English, flipping through Western picture books was one of my favorite activities. In my head, I would pretend to be a fairy or a princess with long blonde hair and big blue eyes. My almost black bowl cut and dark brown, almond-shaped eyes were not pretty enough for my liking. There was not a single Disney Princess, doll, or fictional female protagonist I could relate to.

### FEELING OUT OF PLACE

Feeling out of place is a common experience for minorities. Reasons for feeling out of place in society range from race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, citizenship, cultural differences, language barriers, to stereotypes. Groups or individuals unable to fit into the societal norm feel isolated, excluded, and lack a sense of belonging - an inherent desire for humans. In an effort to fit into the desired or accepted mold, an individual risks losing part of their identity. Sitcoms *Fresh off the Boat* (2015) and *Never Have I Ever* (2020) tackle coming of age narrative, while documentaries *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1987), *Take Out* (2004), and *Hafu* (2013) cover real-life experiences. Dramas such as *The Farewell* (2019), and *Monsoon* (2019), *Okja* (2017) approach feelings of isolation with comedic, thrilling, and romantic twists. Overall, the films share the common theme of feeling out of place and its impact on identity and life choices.

## **Who Killed Vincent Chin?**

The filmmakers, Renee Tajima-Peña and Christine Choy, highlight multiple aspects of Chin's life and the social environment at the time of his death. Interviews of Chin's mother, Lily Chin, reveals the struggles she faced as an Asian immigrant. Lily Chin claims to have witnessed neighborhood children making fun of her situation and showing gestures of slitting their throats. Additionally, while being introduced to American traditions by her husband, such as a baseball game, Chin and her husband were kicked and cursed at. Ultimately, she decided to never come back to a baseball game. Lily Chin's interviews illustrate the hostile reaction people had in Detroit against people of Asian descent. Her interviews were purposely combined with images of the stereotypical all-American practices (i.e. baseball, homemade pies, and a happy family) in order to illustrate an irony between her story and the American Dream. As a result, her experience combined with images of the "American Dream" emphasizes how out of place she felt as she was obviously not experiencing those aspects Americans often boast about. In addition to Lily Chin's interview, the directors provided interviews of other Asian Americans residing in Detroit, simultaneously with footage of Caucasian residents mocking Japanese people and the destruction of Japanese imported vehicles. As a result, the directors were able to paint a clearer picture of how unwelcoming Detroit became for Asians when the Japanese auto-industry began to skyrocket in the United States. Chin's death was thought to be motivated by racism against people of Asian descent, specifically those who are Japanese or who look remotely Japanese. The murderers', Robert Ebens and Michael Nitz, motivation ultimately singled out, confined, and isolated Chin as not a Chinese man, but an Asian man. Their assumptions and murderous act forced Chin to feel out of place as he's not seen as an equivalent American despite being such.

## **Take Out**

In Shih-Ching Tsou and Sean Baker's *Take Out* (Baker, Tsou, 2004, United States), the directors choose to focus on the theme of feeling out of place, specifically through Ming's experience in the United States as an illegal and unskilled Chinese immigrant. While going through his day-to-day life, Ming experiences a variety of obstacles, such as people mocking him in broken English, his inability to properly speak and understand English (which hinders his ability to stand up for himself), and his lack of completely understanding American mannerisms required to make money. By illustrating Ming's difficulties, Tsou and Baker effectively demonstrate how Chinese immigrants are left feeling out of place on foreign lands. Additionally, Ming is also left feeling out of place with his colleagues. Despite his colleagues being illegal Chinese immigrants themselves, they also treat Ming with subtle hostilities, hinting that he isn't welcomed amongst their group either. The employees at the restaurant appear more assimilated into the United States than Ming. For example, Big Sister is charismatic enough to make money, and his best friend is able to understand what Americans want to make money. Ming's inability to understand and accept certain inconveniences (i.e. wrong order or getting scammed on the streets) separates him from his colleagues. As a result of his struggles, Tsou and Baker paint Ming as an isolated foreigner to both Americans and his Chinese colleagues.

## **Hafu**

Megumi Nishikura and Lara Perez Takagi's *Hafu* (Nishikura, Takagi, 2013, United States) documents the complexities of growing up as a mixed race person in Japan. *Hafu* (half) is a universally known term in Japan to describe people who are part Japanese. This term, acting as both a noun and an adjective, is a form of identification, a pejorative, and a potential complement, as many Japanese people find mixed raced people exotic. Being multiracial is both

appealing and troubling in a homogenous country like Japan due to the assumptions people make about a mixed person's background and identity. The label is othering and rather dehumanizing, deriving from "half-breed" which is commonly used to describe hybrid animals.

The documentary follows the lives of five different people as they navigate life in Japan. Each person talks about growing up, realizing their identity, balancing multiple cultures, and feeling unsettled and confused by their race and ethnicity. From a young age, feeling out of place both literally and figuratively is an isolating, yet formative experience for interviewees like, David, Alex, and Miyako.

David, who is half Ghanaian and half Japanese, grew up in a Japanese orphanage and considers himself to be more culturally Japanese. Despite identifying more with his Japanese side, he continues to explore his maternal side and help build a school in Ghana. The directors transition to a young boy, Alex, of Mexican and Japanese ancestry. He struggles to fit in and keep up academically due to his multilingual home life. Miyako, who is half Korean and half Japanese, grew up believing she was full Japanese until she came across her family records during a school project.

Hafu primarily focuses on how one's family can affect their sense of identity. Alex, being multilingual and half Japanese, is bullied in Japanese school. Initially, Alex attends Japanese elementary school. However, Alex is called "not Japanese" and "English-boy" in school by his peers and his teacher considers him slow in school, even though the only reason he has trouble in school is because he is concurrently learning three languages. When Alex tried to ask the teacher for help, he was met by "figure it out" yourself. Thus, Alex felt alienated and out of place at Japanese school. Alex, relies heavily on his family understanding his desire to spend time in Mexico to help boost his confidence. His family also decided that it will be better for him to go

to International school instead of Japanese school in order to avoid the bullying he faced in Japanese school.

In contrast to Alex's story, Miyako's mother hid her Korean side from her. Miyako's mother and family raised her to believe that she was fully Japanese until coming across the truth. She was told by her family that she won't be treated the same if she told her friends that she was only half Japanese or her future husband might not accept that she is half Korean. This led to Miyako feeling disconnected from both sides of her identity. Through the contrasting stories of Alex and Miyako, the film depicts the influence a person's family can have on them, especially in terms of either feeling comfortable with their identity or being troubled by it.

David recalls incidents where other children in the orphanage would not play with him, bully him, and beat him up because he looked different. He remembers a particular moment when he fell and started bleeding while playing soccer. Fellow kids gathered around him, reacting to the color of his blood being red as opposed to green, which was what they presumed about David due to the color of his skin. David states he "was like a space alien to them," causing him to feel out of place at the orphanage during his childhood. Despite feeling alienated, he, along with Alex and Miyako, continued to endure feelings of loneliness.

### **Fresh off the Boat**

*Fresh Off The Boat* (Khan, 2015, United States) focuses on the Huang family adjusting to a new environment, suburban Orlando. The series chooses to portray how Asians feel out of place through various episodes. For example, the pilot starts with the family missing their old life in Chinatown in Washington DC and feeling too Chinese in Orlando. In season 1 episode 1, Eddie's teacher introduces him to the class, struggling to pronounce his Chinese name, Hung-ge Yi Minge. Noticing her mispronunciation, Eddie pipes up with, "Call me Eddie," to which the

teacher responds with a sigh of relief. Something as minor as butchering a name can alienate someone from the group. Eddie deals with the short-lived situation in a way most people would, politely and passively.

During lunch period, Eddie sits at a table with his new classmates while opening up his home-cooked Chinese meal. Confused and appalled by unfamiliar cuisine, students around him point out his food in disgust. The “Lunchbox Moment” is rather common for Asian Americans who bring cultural food to their institution. Facing ridicule from something as little as choosing to eat certain foods causes social and cultural isolation. In response, Eddie assimilates into his new middle school environment by bringing Lunchables to the cafeteria from that point forward. Eddie remarks, “When you live in a Lunchables world, it's not always easy being homemade Chinese food,” taking his negative experiences in stride, accepting his differences, and moving forward.

After being called a chink and getting into a fight at school, Eddie is reprimanded for starting the situation. Jessica and Louis stand up for Eddie, questioning why only Eddie faces consequences and not the kid who used the ethnic slur. Feeling out of place in Orlando, Eddie tries his best to fit in but realizes that he does not have to change himself in order to find a group of friends (“Pilot.” *Fresh Off the Boat*, season 1, episode 1, Hulu, 2015. *Hulu*, <https://www.hulu.com/watch/3ecda132-7410-4403-849b-c06ba948dafd>). Discrimination against Asians is still prevalent in the U.S. The comedy series shows a happy family, only highlighting a fraction of microaggressions, cultural isolation, and assimilation.

## **Okja**

Netflix’s live-action animation hit, *Okja* (Bong, 2017, South Korea), also directed by Bong Joon-ho, displays the unethical behavior of a large American corporation and a young

girl's journey from South Korea to the United States. In exchange for a large sum of money, Mija (Seo-Hyeon Ahn) and her uncle raise Okja, a large pig-like creature, over the course of ten years for the American "Mirando Corporation." Mija, unaware of Okja's gruesome fate, learns of the corporation's plans to transfer Okja from Seoul to New York City for exhibition, and ultimately, slaughter. This film is a social commentary on greed and deception prevalent in corporate America, in addition to animal rights and meat consumption.

Among corrupt, money-hungry characters, Mija is an outlier due to her innocence, resistance to authority, and devotion to Okja. Seo-Hyeon Ahn plays Mija's resilient and assertive character, compelling viewers to root for the strong, female lead throughout the film. To spotlight Mija's cultural heritage at the New York City exhibition of Okja, Mirando Corporation dresses her in a hanbok, a traditional Korean garment. This sets Mija apart from the predominantly white, American crowd. Individually, Seo-Hyeon Ahn is an outlier in the mainstream media production industry as a young, South Korean female actor. Although her character does not express sentiments concerning feeling out of place, the production underscores the theme of not fitting in.

### **The Farewell**

Through the dialogue, Lulu Wang's *The Farewell* (Wang, 2019, United States) reveals that Billi was born in China and was very close to her grandmother (nǎi nai, informal Chinese word for grandmother). Her family soon immigrated to the United States when Billi was a young child. Despite being a Chinese-born Asian American, Billi is left conflicted by her family's cultural practices against the ethics and morals she learned in the United States. Specifically, the family's tradition of lying. Billi's mother explains: "Chinese people have saying: when people get cancer, they die. But it's not the cancer that kills them, it's the fear." (Wang, 0:11:46) This

one phrase and state of mind is enough to distance Billi's beliefs from those of her relatives. Concurrently with her family's lie, Billi is left excluded by her family who shows a fear of her presence around Nai Nai. Her parents reference her showing of emotions which results in the family showing extreme worry when she arrives in China. This is evident through her family's intention of not inviting Billi to the "wedding", opting to keep her in the dark. Throughout the events of the film, Billi shows extreme distaste and sadness towards her family's actions but is forced to set aside her emotions and comply with their wishes to protect Nai Nai. Billi is able to communicate and understand Chinese but is unable to comprehend the ethical reasons behind the lie, illustrating an obvious lack of belonging. Lulu Wang's choice to highlight Billi's antipathy towards her relatives, evident through her passive actions (i.e. tears, facial expressions, solemn movements), in order to frame her as an outsider, a foreigner, to her own culture.

### **Monsoon**

Kit's character, portrayed by Henry Golding, a British-Malaysian actor, rarely speaks Vietnamese and is shown to feel out of touch and place while in Vietnam. The interactions he has with his childhood friend, Lee, is shown to be uneasy when they speak English to one another and when Lee is required to translate back and forth between Kit and the people he interacts with. Kit's inability to speak Vietnamese or relate to the people there in general puts him in an awkward position of a disconnected homelander. Khaou's choice to highlight the language barrier between Kit and the Vietnamese people he interacts with makes him a foreigner, bringing out his Western roots over his Asian blood. Additionally, Kit's portrayal by a British-Malaysian actor, Henry Golding, already makes him a stranger in Vietnam both on and behind the scenes. By the same token, people from the West end up making assumptions about Kit which ultimately blurs the line between his identity: one of a British and one of a Vietnamese

man. Throughout the film, the audience is left to assume Kit's past through dialogue surrounding his childhood, often referencing the events of the catastrophic Vietnam War. The interactions he has with characters such as his new romantic partner, Lewis, illustrate a misunderstood identity from a foreigner's point of view. Lewis makes assumptions of Kit and the children of Vietnam's feelings towards the United States following the Vietnam War. By mentioning topics, such as a lack of American pride in the war and disdain towards Americans by the countries they have waged war with, Lewis' assumptions of Kit put him on a defensive interaction as he defends Vietnam and is confused as to why the United States was willing to pride themselves over a war that wrecked his childhood.

### **Never Have I Ever**

Kaling's *Never Have I Ever* (Kaling, 2020, United States) focuses on Devi's role as an Indian American teenager conflicted between her traditional roots at home and her desire to be a normal American teenager. Throughout the series, Devi attempts to act like an ordinary teenager, embracing aspects of adolescence to which her mother disapproves of. For example, she tries on colored highlights, attempts to get a boyfriend, and consumes alcohol. Despite being elements of teenagehood often praised in Western soap operas ("... gotten so drunk with popular kids" *Never Have I Ever*, season 1, episode 3, Netflix, 27 Apr. 2020. *Netflix*, [www.netflix.com/watch/81128601](http://www.netflix.com/watch/81128601).), Devi's fear of getting caught as well as her mother's backlash towards her actions isolate her from the rest of her peers. While her peers equate party attendance and alcohol as socially acceptable, Devi's desire to fit in with the "cool kids" ends up clashing with her mother's view of a good Indian girl. Additionally, she finds traditional practices like Ganesh Puja and wearing her Sari annoying rather than something to be proud of. Her desire to feel more American is highlighted by her eagerness to attend Princeton, find a

white boyfriend, become an atheist, and eat cheeseburgers. (“... never felt so Indian” *Never Have I Ever*, season 1, episode 4, Netflix, 27 Apr. 2020. *Netflix*, [www.netflix.com/watch/81128600](http://www.netflix.com/watch/81128600).) Oftentimes, Devi appears trapped between being “too American” for her Indian culture and “too Indian” to be a typical American teenager. Kaling chooses to bring out Devi’s complicated feelings of belonging in the fourth episode in which she feels dually isolated within her Indian community in addition to her peer network. Within her Indian community, Devi questions and feels annoyed by certain traditions and celebrations; “Although Devi was Indian, she didn’t think of herself as *Indian Indian* like these girls [...] so sometimes she felt a little out of place.” (“... never felt so Indian” *Never Have I Ever*, season 1, episode 4, Netflix, 27 Apr. 2020. *Netflix*, [www.netflix.com/watch/81128600](http://www.netflix.com/watch/81128600).) Kaling uses Devi to paint the complicated experience of feeling out of place as an Asian American torn between her traditional and western roots.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the shows’ and films’ varying genres and stories, each production displays the difficulties of standing out in a crowd. Series like *Fresh Off The Boat* (2015), *Never Have I Ever* (2020) appeal to wide audiences while conveying the idea of not fitting in in a comedic way. In addition, dramatic stories such as *The Farewell* (2019), *Monsoon* (2019), and *Okja* (2017) place characters in unfamiliar geographical locations to distinguish them from the majority. In turn, this technique emphasizes characters’ cultural differences. Lastly, documentaries, *Take Out* (2004), *Hafu* (2013), *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1987) highlight the lives of those who face social challenges.

## PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

**Nyaari Kothiya**

Moving to the United States was a massive decision for me. When I first came here, I certainly felt extremely out of place. I felt that I was a little too connected to my roots and was afraid to show my “Indian side” to anyone at school. Even though I had Nicole and Mrs. Mckenna, I still felt that I couldn’t be truly honest with anyone other than them. Throughout my high school experience, I had a constant feeling of being too Indian or not being American enough. After graduating from high school, I took a trip to India to visit my friends and family for the first time in three years. I was excited about it and looked forward to being where my core was. However, the experience was different than I expected. To a degree, I was “too American” and had begun to feel out of place in India. Minute things, for example, hugging my friend when I hung out with them led to confusion among some of them because they were not used to that. When I am in the United States, I look for opportunities to not communicate with people in English and instead speak Hindi or Gujarati. However, when I went to India, I noticed that I spoke more English than I expected, leading to my friends teasing me by calling me an “NRI” (Non-Resident Indian) implying that I was becoming an American. To add fuel to fire, every time I said “sorry” or “thank you” to them, they would ask “why are you behaving like an American?” In addition, the freedom and the thoughts that I was used to in the United States were not seen as “normal” within some of my extended family. It made me feel a little alienated in the country I grew up in and considered my core. Even though I loved my trip overall, it now feels as if I will always be either “too American” or “too Indian” in whatever setting I am in, even though nobody around me will consider me that. Sometimes I feel out of place even within the family I have in the U.S.. I feel that I am a completely different person every time I am back home from college for a break. Even though people from my family have been in the US for longer than I have, I still struggle to sometimes be as “American” as I want to be and am afraid

of being “too American” even at home. I still try my best to try to fit into being the “ideal Indian daughter” at times. I feel like Kamala from *Never Have I Ever* who struggled to toggle between adopting American values and customs while retaining her Indian roots.

### **Jason Le**

Growing up in Orange County, California, I felt like I was part of the majority there. Weekends with my cousins, Asia town every other week, and the endless amounts of Vietnamese cuisine. Everything I did, regarding the Vietnamese practices my parents taught me (i.e. Asian squat, use of specific phrases, and eating specific foods) were all normal things around my cousins and at school. Students at my elementary school didn’t care because they were practically doing the same things too. Chinese New Year, Vietnamese teachers and students, as well as Asian cuisine were often served at my school, treated as if it’s a normal tradition. Of course, once I left for Texas, everything was completely different. For the first time in my life, looking Asian became something weird and not something people would take pride of.

Despite being born in California, the school district thought I belonged in an ESL program (English as a Second Language) and treated me as if I didn’t speak a word of English. I can recall having one Vietnamese friend while I was in elementary school. Being one of the few Asian students at my school meant I was called “ching chong,” “coin-slot eyes,” and was asked quite frequently if I came from China or Hong Kong or whether I knew karate or kung fu.

“No, I’m not from China. I was born in California.”

“I don’t know kung fu or karate.”

“I’m Vietnamese.”

The questions got annoying and went on for about a year and a half. Same reply, same reaction, it became habitual. The only time people pointed their eyes towards me was when we

talked about the Vietnam War during class. That was the only time people knew what Vietnam was, when my parents country was war-torn and the time their homes were bombed. The environment was completely different from California. Everyone celebrated Vietnamese culture and showed respect and decency for it. What the heck, Texas?

Walking around and seeing people who didn't look like me felt strange, considering I grew up in a heavily Vietnamese-populated area. The only times I heard Vietnamese was when I was at home or when my parents took me to Bellaire, a town just a couple miles away from the downtown area. There was a bubble of Vietnamese people my parents felt as if they could bond with. Whether it was in a restaurant or at church, my parents visited those places to just hear the Vietnamese or to feel like they belonged somewhere.

Without having a peer network of Vietnamese friends, everything just felt isolating. I couldn't tell people about the foods I liked because it was weird. I started to resent banh mi, pho, spring rolls, and even boba tea. All these foods used to be normal in California but, for some reason, people at school thought they were too exotic, strange, and un-American. Similar to Eddie from *Fresh off the Boat*, I begged my parents for Lunchables or anything American just so I can not show up to school feeling ashamed of myself.

Of course, as time went on, things got better in Texas. In high school, I was able to meet more Vietnamese students through orchestra, and they were more celebratory of Asian culture. Once Katy Asia Town had its grand opening, everything Asian became popular. It's almost like being Asian became trendy and cool. Suddenly, everyone wanted to eat pho, banh mi, and drink more boba. Even though my culture became fascinated or popular, it felt isolating to know that this was the only circumstance that made me visible.

**Anna Sakamoto**

Due to Japan's homogeneous population, feeling isolated is extremely common for people who are not full Japanese and foreigners. I had Japanese blood, Japanese citizenship, a Japanese palate, and a perfect accent, yet I was never seen as a normal Japanese girl. To fellow classmates, I was an "amerikajin" American, or "gaijin" foreigner, even at the mere age of seven. I was the embodiment of a stigma since I wasn't a "full breed." Being bullied and alienated because of my mixed roots made me feel uncomfortable, despite not fully understanding why at such a young age. Not only did those around me label me as "hafu" half Japanese, but I would soon begin introducing myself to fellow classmates by saying, "Hello, my name is Anna, and I am hafu (or 'daburu,' meaning double or two ethnicities)." Part of me was proud to call myself "hafu," thinking it made me unique, yet another part of me was embarrassed and wished so desperately to fit in with those around me.

Although my spoken grammar occasionally fell short, my mannerisms and tendencies were utterly Japanese. For instance, I absorbed the concept of "enryo" modesty, hesitation, and restraint early on in my childhood. I did not realize how strong "enryo's" cultural grasp was until I moved to the U.S.. During snack time at my new elementary school, fellow classmates would share their novel American cookies, crackers, and chips with me. However, I would politely refuse, despite my desire to try Cheetos, Fruit Roll-Ups, and Double Stuf Oreos. By taking their offers, I was afraid of coming off as greedy and rude, assuming that they were only offering their snacks to be polite. In retrospect, my thinking seems unproductive and reflects how shy I used to be. Years later, gifts and money are still difficult to accept, even from family and close friends. I feel a sense of guilt, but perhaps this could also be due to my Jewish heritage.

In Hawaii, I only ever stuck out like a sore thumb due to my Jewish heritage. The Jewish population in Hawaii is essentially non-existent. In high school, I witnessed numerous anti-

Semetic incidents in addition to being mocked by classmates for being a Jew. My mom did not raise my brother and I to be religious; however, that part of our identity is no less important to us.

For mixed people, depending on how they were raised and what physical features are more prominent, they can decide if they want to identify as just one ethnicity. I spent most of my life raised by my Caucasian mom. I have both Asian and Caucasian features, but can potentially be mistaken for another race altogether. I'm either racially ambiguous, just Asian to white people, or potentially whitewashed or not Asian enough to full Asian people and other people of color. Choosing to only identify as white or Asian would be inauthentic, so that is why I have to check the "Other" box. I question whether my voice is legitimate when talking about the Asian experience because I was not raised in an Asian household. Do I genuinely understand what it is like to be an Asian woman? Yes and no. I wish I didn't have to choose what I am, but America's view of race is binary, so I cannot help but be influenced by that view as an American.

### MODEL MINORITY MYTH

The model minority myth, grounded in stereotypes or outside perceptions force Asian Americans into a box, believing that they have "managed to achieve well-paying positions and higher socioeconomic statuses through education and hard work despite bigotry and racism" (Wong 99). The myth conforms Asian Americans to a set of norms in society often being forced to "do well in school and careers, are hard-working and self-sufficient. It follows that Asian Americans are a model for all groups, especially other minority groups" (Wong 100). As a result of the model minority myth, Asian Americans tend to be stripped of individuality or personality by outside spectators who confine them into a set of norms. Dark humor in films, such as *Better*

*Luck Tomorrow* (2002) and *Harold and Kumar Go To White Castle* (2004), could be used to satirize stereotypes or even break the myth in elaborate ways. Meanwhile, coming of age television shows, such as *Never Have I Ever* (2020), while unknowingly fulfill aspects of the myth, come to question it and embrace individuality.

### **Better Luck Tomorrow**

*Better Luck Tomorrow* (Lin, 2002, United States) is an early 2000s tragicomedy documenting the life of Ben Manibang, an overachieving high school student looking to win the heart of Stephanie, a popular cheerleader. Ben and his social circle are products of tiger parenting, glorifying their college resumes through an array of extracurricular activities, high standardized test scores, and stellar grades. The film stresses the extreme consequences of the model minority myth, microaggressions, and toxic masculinity. Characters use self-deprecating humor to fit in at school and are patronized, ridiculed, and alienated by white classmates. Dark comedy and irony attract adolescent audiences. They feel “less than” in terms of masculinity and sexual experience. However, by the end of the movie, Ben, along with his group members, devolve into characters unlike their obedient, studious selves.

Driven by economic gain and adrenaline-pumping risky behavior, Ben and his companions start a schoolwide cheating operation, eventually transitioning to more perilous crimes. Their overachieving nature is clouded by hidden desires to commit such acts due to the immense pressures put on them to succeed. Their actions are the result of the dangers of the model minority myth because it sets an unhealthy expectation for Asian students to meet. The characters of the film exhibit toxic drinking habits, drug consumption, and emotional distress, where their actions ultimately culminate in a murder.

### **Harold and Kumar Go To White Castle & Take Out**

In *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle* (Leiner, 2004, United States), Danny Leiner compiles but by the same token, breaks the model minority myth through the protagonists: Harold Lee and Kumar Patel. Targeted towards a more mature audience, Leiner relies on inappropriate humor and comedic tropes to both portray and poke fun at the model minority myth. Leiner introduces these characters to the audience in a way that epitomizes their group identities to a certain extent. Harold is a high strung, hardworking, submissive, and tidy accountant. These character traits fall within his domain of the stereotypical Korean American trope perpetuated by Westerners. Kumar, on the other hand, is stereotyped by his stellar academic statistics and predestined career of becoming a medical doctor. Even though they adhere to certain aspects of being a model minority, they break the model minority myth in various ways such as breaking the law by smoking weed and punching a cop. In addition, Kumar performs surgery without a proper license. Similar to *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle*, Shih-Ching Tsou and Sean Baker's *Take Out* (2004), simultaneously epitomizes and demolishes the model minority myth through their protagonist, Ming. Throughout the film, Ming is portrayed as quiet and submissive, often seen following orders and keeping his head down. Despite being mocked and reprimanded by customers and his own colleagues, he fails to confront or resist them. Despite having the above mentioned stereotypical characteristics of a model minority, Ming defies aspects of the model minority myth by breaking the law, evident through his illegal immigration to the United States, and being an unskilled worker.

### **Never Have I Ever**

Throughout the series, *Never Have I Ever* (Kaling, 2020, United States), Kaling addresses elements of the model minority myth specifically through Devi's high school accomplishments and resume. In the pilot, Devi is established as an overachiever, referencing her AP classes,

perfect PSAT scores, extracurriculars, her mother's emphasis on attending an Ivy League school and her competition with another top student, Ben Gross. The themes of Devi's overachieving nature are maintained throughout the series as her academics seem to never suffer despite the turmoil in her social and family life. Specifically, Devi represents the model minority myth when she attempts to sell herself to a prestigious college counselor. She tries to buy his favor through flaunting her advanced classes, standardized test scores, and volunteer work to which the college counselor replies with indifference. He claims her statistics are common for Indian students and that no Ivy League wants to see another typical Indian tryhard. He urges Devi to be more introspective and reflect on her past trauma in her college essay, implying that her adversity is her only distinguishing factor.

("... never felt so Indian" *Never Have I Ever*, season 1, episode 4, Netflix, 27 Apr. 2020. *Netflix*, [www.netflix.com/watch/81128600](http://www.netflix.com/watch/81128600).) By choosing to portray Devi's extraordinary statistics as ordinary, Kaling emphasizes the problem with the model minority myth. The myth confines students to a specific set of standards. According to Stacey Lee, regarding a Chinese American student and the difficulty of: "the pressure the model minority stereotype places on Asian students to achieve. Mei Mei's statement points to the way that the stereotype influences how she sees herself. Despite her success, Mei Mei often spoke of her "poor" performance" (Lee 419). Despite Devi's achievements, the model minority myth paints her high performance as average and her identity is ultimately stripped and reduced to a minimum bar expected of all Indian American students.

## CONCLUSION

*Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle's* dated humor reflects the film's appeal to a mature audience and how humor was approached during the early 2000s. Coming off as slightly

more insensitive compared to modern and lighthearted television shows, such as *Never Have I Ever*'s portrayal of the model minority myth. Despite both focusing on tropes based on ethnicity, *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* forces its characters to fulfill their stereotypes in a humorous and ironic way whilst breaking them in an exaggerated manner. From time to time, the characters appear both aware and unaware of their stereotypes, often playing them off as normal. Kaling's *Never Have I Ever* relies on characters who are fully aware of their stereotype and often portrays them as questioning these norms. Devi, the protagonist, questions her role and desires to be this all-American teenager. Yet, she is still willing to embrace aspects of the myth that are inherently a part of her unique personality. The model minority myth, perpetuated by stereotypes imposed by spectators, confines Asians and Asian Americans into a set bubble, characterizing and stripping them of individuality. *Better Luck Tomorrow* (2002) and *Harold and Kumar Go To White Castle* (2004) approach the model minority myth through dark humor, often poking fun at the stereotypes and even breaking them to a paramount extent. Some entertainment mediums, such as the television series *Never Have I Ever* (2020), choose to embrace aspects of the myth but also question it.

## PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

### **Nyaari Kothiya**

I didn't come across the concept of the model minority myth until recently due to the Black Lives Matter movement. When I did familiarize myself with the concept, I realized that I am the living embodiment of it. I believe in the concept of the American Dream, tend to be quiet and reserved and would much rather keep my head down and continue doing my thing in many settings, and am pre-med (the biggest model minority aspect about me). Sometimes, I do struggle

with the fact that I may be accidentally perpetuating the model minority myth, but I do constantly remind myself that I am working on finding my voice and can't control my interests.

### **Jason Le**

Throughout my days in elementary school, middle school, and half of high school, I was always the quiet and smart kid. I kept my head down, stayed out of trouble, and respected authority and did what I was told. Like what most of my peers expected, I played the violin and cello, took all AP classes, and spent a lot of time studying in the library. I fulfilled those expectations and checked off all those boxes in people's heads. Naturally, everyone expected me to be in the top ten of my class, reach the Ivy Leagues, and become a doctor or something similar. As a result, those expectations became my expectations and, more than anything, I was afraid to break the myth and fall miserably. If I received something less than A, I would walk home ashamed than beyond imagination. It's not an exaggeration when I say I would rather drop off the face of the planet than bring home a B for most of my life. Cliche as it is for an Asian to want an A, it meant everything to me. My heart would race every time I countered a figure of authority in a civil debate. When it came to teachers, they were always right. Everything felt like I had to come out on top while staying invisible. I felt my personality being stripped away while in public, always keeping this facade up because of an unspoken obligation.

### **Anna Sakamoto**

When my brother was applying to colleges, he worried about how schools would perceive him due to his name. His first and last name are Japanese, but his middle name is Western. However, middle initials usually suffice for applications, therefore schools would only see his Asian name. He feared being stereotyped by the admissions offices and grew concerned that his transcript and scores did not meet the standards of the model minority myth. For

instance, one of my closest friend's is also half Japanese and half Caucasian. Her father is white; therefore, her last name is Anglo. Her first name is also Western. In order to avoid unfair, racially-charged treatment in the college process, she only checked the "White" box on her application. While she was a potential victim of anti-Asian bias, she also exercised her white privilege.

I did not worry as much since my first name is a common Western name, but I certainly compared my adequate but not stellar test scores to my friends' - the majority of whom are part or full Asian like myself. I was a very serious student in high school but lacked the pressure to bring home A's like some of my friends. My mom, who graduated at the top of her class in high school and college, never pressured me to perform because she knew how much stress I put on myself already. She was right. I took as many APs as I could and hated that I wasn't in an upper-level math class like my friends. I invested time in SAT and ACT prep classes and had a math tutor, but this was the norm, especially at the hypercompetitive private school I attended. I worked hard for my consistent, strong grades but do not fit into the model minority mold.

## STIGMA

A stigma emerges from people's fear of the unknown. Circumstances associated with specific outcomes perceived as shameful and damaging cause stigmas to form. In particular, social stigma is prejudice against certain members of society who are viewed as different. For instance, the stigma of lacking an education will not only eliminate employment opportunities, but also cause people to make potentially wrong assumptions about a person. Films that highlight the dangers of stigma include: *3 Idiots* (2009), *Period. End of Sentence.* (2018), and *Your Name*

*Engraved Herein* (2020). Regardless of genre, each film encapsulates the power of stigma appealing to audiences from all walks of life.

### **3 Idiots**

Rajkumar Hirani's *3 Idiots* (Hirani, 2009, India) addresses various stigmas within a cultural community regarding career choices, mental health, and familial pressures. The three protagonists -- Rancho, Raju, and Farhan -- are introduced as engineering students at a prestigious college in India. Their families and the school leadership promote engineering as the ideal career for men. Similarly, women are expected to become doctors. Farhan's father is often portrayed as a brute force in his life, striking fear and pressuring his son to become an engineer rather than pursuing his passion of wildlife photography. Pursuing a career outside the realm of STEM is perceived as following a path that will result in lower prestige, less money, and a smaller focus. *3 Idiots* (2009) also covers the stigma of mental health. The hypercompetitive, male-dominated environment forces students to repress feelings of inadequacy. Their worth is determined by the work they hand in for grades and their class rank. Students are reduced to a score regardless of creativity, ambition, and effort. After two students commit suicide and one attempts it, the school makes no effort to address the stresses, including dealing with harsh professors who exacerbate the situation.

### **Period. End of Sentence**

Rayka Zehtabchi's academy award-winning documentary short, *Period. End of Sentence*. (Zehtabchi, 2019, United States), follows the stigma and miseducation of the menstrual cycle in poorer Indian villages. Zehtabchi interviews women living in Hapur villages on their struggles to access menstrual products and misinformation about feminine hygiene. Unable to afford pads and tampons, women are reduced to fashioning makeshift liners with household cloths. Villagers

view menstruation as a taboo subject, where both men and women display discomfort and a lack of knowledge when asked about the topic. Older women explain the menstrual cycle as God expelling bad blood out of the female body. Monthly menstruation deprives women from daily activities such as prayer and school. The stigma deems women as dirty, inferior, and unproductive during their periods.

The film shifts to Arunachalam Muruganantham's pad machine invention and its establishment in a Hapur village. The introduction of a pad machine fosters a community of women, promoting female empowerment, affordable and accessible menstrual products, and better education. *Period. End of Sentence.* (2019) instigated a movement to destigmatize menstruation and continues to do so through The Pad Project.

### **Your Name Engraved Herein**

Netflix recently released an emotional, human-intimate drama set in 1987-post-martial-law Taiwan. *Your Name Engraved Herein* (Liu, 2020, Taiwan) follows Jia-han, a struggling, closeted adolescent in love with his best friend, Birdy. Social stigma of homosexuality, and academic pressure force Jia-han and Birdy to conform to societal norms, inhibiting themselves from expressing their feelings for one another. This film tackles more than the repercussions of homophobia by showing Jia-han's difficult family relations and strict, militaristic, Catholic boys' school environment. Stigma surrounding the LGBTQ+ community compels Birdy to deny his true feelings for Jia-han. Birdy's neglect towards his best friend causes tension and heartbreak for both boys. This film also confronts the stigma of male emotions.

The movie flashes decades forward to the present where the viewer sees middle-aged Jia-han attend a high school reunion before traveling to Montreal, Canada. Jia-Han also learns of Birdy's marriage and eventual divorce to Ban-Ban, his childhood girlfriend. Birdy's hidden

sexuality led to an unfulfilled marriage. Liu's portrayal of Ban-Ban's feelings, of Birdy ruining everyone's lives, accurately depicts the plight of the LGBTQ+ members stuck in heterosexual marriages due to the stigma of same sex relationships. In socially and stigmatically forced marriages, it is not just the LGBTQ+ member that struggles but also leads to the unhappiness of their partner. Mourning the loss of Father Oliver, a Canadian priest who once helped him cope with his sexual orientation, Jia-han comes to find that the priest was also gay. Originally urging Jia-han to reject his feelings for Birdy, Father Oliver chose not to reveal his own struggles with his sexuality so that Jia-han would not go through the same torment. Internalizing social stigma prevents people from accepting their true identity. With Jia-Han and Birdy taking a walk in Montreal at the end of the film, Liu conveys how Jia-Han and Birdy can only be happy in Montreal, not Taiwan. This plays into the larger concept of the LGBTQ+ community still being a stigma in Asian countries and remains a taboo like concept within the Asian American community.

## CONCLUSION

Although *3 Idiots* (Hirani, 2009, India), *Period. End of Sentence.* (Zehtabchi, 2019, United States), and *Your Name Engraved Herein* (Liu, 2020, Taiwan) call attention to three dissimilar stigmas, all have lasting impacts. Additionally, each film is either true or based on true events, making the stories utterly more gripping. Stigma suffocates those in its path, yet many people, like the men and women in the three films, also overcome the discrimination. For example, Rancho, Raju and Farhan pursue what they love, the women from the Harpur villages gain access to feminine products, and Jia-han and Birdy come to terms with their sexuality.

## PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

## **Nyaari Kothiya**

I had never come across topics of mental health while I was in India. However, at Hamilton, I was introduced to therapy and the benefits of it. I remember telling my mother about therapy and her saying that she didn't believe I needed it at that particular time. I never saw mental health and wellness as a stigma, yet it was a struggle to talk about it freely at home. I was extremely reluctant to seek out help until my friends at Hamilton practically forced me to reach out for help because they saw how I was affected by everything going on in my life. When I first started therapy, I didn't tell my parents about it until I was two sessions in and then told them because of the guilt I had for hiding it from them. My parents and I are now accepting of me seeking therapy. However, I do acknowledge that because of the stigma surrounding mental health, there was an initial hesitation not just from them but from me.

## **Jason Le**

### Career choice

Coming from a lineage filled with doctors, nurses, or something remotely within the healthcare field clearly mapped out my destiny. My parents wanted me to major in Biology, Chemistry, or the combination of both. For the longest time, I thought it was something I wanted. Despite hating anything to do with Biology and Chemistry, I managed to convince myself that no matter how unhappy I am right now, it'll get better eventually. Going to college and being able to choose whatever major felt more liberating if anything. I was able to drop the Biology and Chemistry track for something interesting and worth living for. Film, English, and Psychology were all topics I wanted to study but never got a chance to dive into until I went to college. In college, there was a lack of parental oversight and so much freedom to manipulate my future and my own destiny.

## Mental Health

My parents brushed off my mental health plenty of times. It's heavily implied by them that mental health and anything that "makes me look bad" isn't welcomed into our family. To my parents, being sad was another word for being selfish and dishonorable. They found sadness as an insult to the family. As a result, I hid a lot of my emotions from my parents during middle school and high school. When you are told that stress, sadness, and anxiety are unacceptable, you learn to associate those emotions with shame. It wasn't until college that I started going to therapy, initially for the purpose of my gender transition. Going to therapy in college has allowed me to embrace and share the emotions my parents forced me to hide. Even though I started going to therapy, I had to keep it a secret. It was only then when things got into the realms of medical emergencies for them to figure out how much mental health affected me. As a result of that experience, my parents still saw that incident as shameful. My parents made sure that I kept that part of my life a secret from the rest of my relatives in California and Vietnam because of how embarrassed they felt about it. At the end of the day, their reaction to my mental health felt like an attempt to save face and not for the sake of my emotional wellbeing.

## LGBT identity

At the peak of my adolescence, it was hard for my parents to first accept me as a lesbian and then a transgender man. My parents had dreams of me marrying a man and having kids of my own. It was only while I was away, living in New York, I was able to finally let go and free myself. Without my parents' watchful eye or the pressure of saving face for the family, I was free to express myself as a transgender man. I was able to start hormone replacement therapy in an accepting environment, introduce myself to people as a different person, and truly live life as an out and proud transgender man. The first member of the family I came out to was my older

cousin in Vietnam who was already out as a gay man. He gave me the courage to call my aunt and tell her about my transgender identity and slowly, I was able to come out to my parents as a transgender man. My first winter break home, after coming out to my parents, was obviously difficult for me. While I was away, I found out from a middle man -- my aunt, that my parents had prayed everyday for me to be a normal woman. They prayed that I would find a boyfriend, dress more feminine, and be exactly like my sister.

## ASIANS AT HAMILTON

Identifying as Asian and/or Asian American on Hamilton's campus comes with its challenges. This sparked an extensive conversation amongst the team with topics ranging from the Asian Student Union, dining hall food, to the Multicultural Peer Mentoring Program. Before sharing our thoughts, we explicitly want to mention that the observations and feelings are ours and do not reflect every Asian or Asian American students' opinions and experiences.

The food at dining halls has constantly served as a reminder of where we are and made each of us homesick at times. Le feels homesick because he misses having Vietnamese noodles on Sundays. Collectively, we yearn for steaming white rice and are always disappointed with the reiterations of Asian cuisine in the dining halls. Le remembers grabbing a bowl of pho at Commons and being underwhelmed. He didn't feel underwhelmed because the pho didn't taste like his mother's, but rather the fact that the "whole thing was completely wrong." The components and ingredients were inaccurate to him. To him, "It almost felt like an insult to injury." Sakamoto remarks on her personal adjustment to dining hall food each time she returns to campus. Kothiya is vegetarian and was underwhelmed by the food this past semester. Her visits to the dining hall averaged less than five swipes a week. She resorted to making all her

meals in the communal kitchen of her residence hall. She gave up on dining hall food this past semester yet, still has hope for more vegetarian and vegan options at McEwen in the upcoming semester (Spring 2021). Le also mentioned how the boba at Euphoria and the iteration of banh mi at Opus was abysmal. Kothiya feels the need to correct the phrase “chai tea” periodically. Chai means tea and the phrase “chai tea” makes no sense when said out loud or written.

Le, who identifies as Vietnamese, was excited to come across the various opportunities presented at the club fair his freshman year. When he came across the Asian Student Union (referred to as ASU in the remainder of this paper), he felt ecstatic to finally find a place to connect with people from similar backgrounds, which he had previously struggled with during the first few weeks of his freshman year. He recalls approaching ASU’s table, asking club members if there was a Vietnamese branch. The response he received was that it didn’t exist, however, he could start one if he wanted to. He mentioned how upset he was and how he felt culturally isolated from that moment forward. He can’t help but envy the Korean, Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian branches for celebrating their respective holidays and eating food from their cultures while he resorts to eating Chinese food as a substitute for Vietnamese food. The lack of a Chinese New Years celebration on campus has affected Jason the most among everything else. The one Chinese New Year he spent on campus was one of his worst memories. The lack of festivities like opening red envelopes, eating traditional food, and having the comforting presence of family impacted him emotionally. He ended the day eating fried rice alone in his dorm. Le emphasized how his Asian friends in college do not celebrate Chinese New Year, making him question his sense of belonging at Hamilton.

Kothiya, who identifies as Indian, attends the South Asian branch meetings regularly and feels excited to share her love of Bollywood movies and Indian food with other members. The

meetings mean a lot to her and make her feel connected to her roots. She recalls celebrating Diwali (“the festival of lights” and the Hindu New Year) during her first year, feeling at peace because that was her first Diwali away from family. Le, however, recalls walking Kothiya to the celebration and feeling down throughout the evening because he lacked a celebration of his culture on campus. Kothiya recalls speaking about the importance of Diwali to herself at the lighting of the village during her first year as a representative from the South Asian branch, and being ecstatic about the genuine interest that people showed in her culture after the event. Sakamoto, who identifies as half Japanese, has not attended any Japanese branch meetings because she does not know anyone who attends them, nor does she have Japanese friends who would want to go with her.

In regards to the student body, we found a distinct dynamic between the international students who identify as Asian and Asian Americans. We noticed how there seems to be a clear distinction between groups of Asian international students and Asian American students. An Asian international student once mentioned how they felt that Asians weren’t people of color, in a conversation they had with Kothiya. Since then, she struggles to cope with feelings of doubt about anyone else on campus having the same thoughts. Le feels like he doesn’t belong in ASU because he identifies as Asian American. He explicitly stated that it wasn’t because of any negative experience he had with ASU, but because he felt uneasy when he attended meetings. Le went to a food night hosted by the Korean branch and felt excluded because the students spoke in both, Korean and English. Le cannot understand Korean. Sakamoto understands that having separate branches is important and that it builds a sense of community within Hamilton but feels that it would be more uniting and healthier without any branches. She suggested a setting in

which everyone could celebrate different Asian cultures and learn from one another since each is so unique.

Sakamoto is mixed race and still has yet to figure out if she is Asian or Asian American. She occasionally feels out of place at Hamilton because she can neither identify fully with the white student body, nor the Asian student body. Le also felt that Asian international students didn't want to interact with him because they perceive him as too whitewashed.

We have all been a part of the Multicultural Peer Mentoring Program at Hamilton but have had differing experiences. Kothiya had a very positive experience with her mentor because she was in the same field of study as her. She says that they have a great relationship and have connected on various levels. Sakamoto had a wonderful experience with her mentor as well. She echoes everything Kothiya said and added that the times she spent with her mentor and fellow mentee were very meaningful. However, Le had a different experience. While Kothiya's and Sakamoto's mentors were Asian or Asian Americans, Le's mentor was a Caucasian international student who wasn't interested in the same field as him. He loves his mentor and she is one of the most reliable and trustworthy friends he has at Hamilton, yet he can't shake the feeling of being isolated. He couldn't connect with her based on being Asian at a predominantly white institution. Overall, he wishes for a more robust support system and resources dedicated to Asians and Asian Americans on campus.

We would like to remind the reader that the incidents and opinions mentioned above are our own and are not a representation of the Asian and Asian American experiences at Hamilton. Despite feeling out of place, we agree that attending Hamilton has been an overall positive experience, and we are grateful and excited for our remaining time in college.

## DATING AS ASIANS

Since streaming Netflix's *Indian Matchmaking* (Mindhra, 2020, United States), we have had various conversations concerning dating and potential partners. In the midst of our chats, we noticed commonalities in what we wanted in a future partner. We agreed on how essential it is for each of us to have a partner who respects, understands, and values our respective cultures. Sakamoto envisions someone, regardless of race, who is willing to embrace Japanese culture and try unique foods from Japan and other Asian countries. Kothiya remarked on the importance of her partner not only wanting to celebrate her favorite festivals but also raise children as trilingual, like herself. Le talked about potentially being with someone of Vietnamese heritage like himself. For instance, if Le lives far from home in the future, he would appreciate a future partner with shared cultural experiences. On days when he feels particularly alone, it would bring him comfort knowing that someone would be willing to celebrate holidays, such as the Chinese New Year. Feeling close to home is key for Le.

In terms of dating, our standards and experiences varied. Attending a predominantly white institution in central New York comes with the struggle of finding that special someone each of us described earlier. In some cases, dating outside of one's race can be tricky. Sakamoto describes a scenario in which she felt uncomfortable due to someone's attraction to her on the basis of her Japanese identity. Sakamoto feels that someone should only pursue someone because of their personality and positive qualities. People of color, not just those who identify as Asian, occasionally face the possibility of being pursued just because of their race and culture. This is extremely othering, and while some POCs may not mind this, others may feel uneasy about appealing to someone because of their race. Kothiya and Le discussed how they tend to find better dating options on Facebook groups like Subtle Asian Dating.

## CONCLUSION

This project provided us with the opportunity to analyze films about the Asian and/or Asian American experience, helping us understand the different practices, cultures, and circumstances that contribute to forming one's identity. Narratives are unique to individuals, therefore, no single experience is universal. Reflecting on our own experiences while watching these films, we realized that our personal stories vary but still show parallels to the film. This tells us that there are still stories out there that need to be told and films that need to be seen. We intend to use this research to provide insight on how Hamilton College can better support Asians and Asian Americans to improve their quality of life on campus.

Le now feels more proud to be Asian and further believes that you should not be forced to fully lose yourself in American culture in order to belong. Sakamoto deeply connects with the fact that one can never generalize a culture or term, specifically the label, "Asian." She understands that "Asian" is one of the most ambiguous terms one could use to define an entire community. For instance, what is the perfect answer to what makes someone Asian? Kothiya's biggest takeaway from this project has been the fact that transition is a continual process that can span for multiple years. Now, she feels more comfortable with the idea of not needing to identify with either "Asian" or "Asian American." As a group, we have had the chance to reflect on our stories as Hamilton students and as individuals. We look forward to telling our stories in addition to other people's experiences.

## APPENDIX A: DEFINITIONS

These terms were mentioned briefly in the paper but were not given a full explanation. The terms identified and defined above serve to provide a comprehensive understanding of background information in the films we analyzed as well as in our own personal statements. We chose to define these terms, despite the subjective view on them, to provide an insight of how we view these terms in order to keep it under some universal umbrella.

Assimilation: The term, assimilation, is defined by Merriam-Webster as “the process of taking into mind and thoroughly understanding” and “absorbing into the cultural tradition of a population or group” (“Assimilate”). Scholars like Robert E. Park saw assimilation as “a solution to racial difference” and formed their “theory of interaction” of groups: a “natural process that begins with competition and ends with assimilation” (Park 14). Assimilation has been widely seen as “a taken-for-granted of immigrant incorporation in which the state holds a universal and implicit benign presence” (Park 15) Within the context of this paper, the state is the popular culture in the United States, often seen as the popular culture of a “white america” (Park 14). Park argues that assimilation is not a concept that needs to be achieved; it is rather a destination for one to aspire to (Park 15).

Diaspora: The dispersion of people from a certain ethnic community throughout the world.

Ethnicity: According to Bonus “ethnicity [...] refers to a kind of group formation on the basis of one or several attributes that subjects of such a group may hold in common: religion, language, or any number of social, political, or cultural features and traits that they may possess, including,

but not limited to, racial characteristics, geographical origin, and national identification. It is both a product and an ongoing process of determining who or what gets included and excluded in a group, making ethnicity, therefore, an endless construction of similarity and difference that marks and limits the boundaries of a community” (Bonus 78).

Yellowface: Moon defines yellowface as “a term used primarily during the twentieth century to describe the ways in which white actors portrayed Asians, [and] manifested degrading images of Chinese immigrants on the stage” (Moon 16/page 6). Chinese characters in films are often portrayed by white actors with “exaggerated pitch black eyeliner, dark straight hair, elaborate costuming, and subservience to white Westerners signaling their ‘Chineseness’” (Vats 424). Historically, not only does yellowface foster stereotypes, but also it “helped justify discriminatory anti-Chinese immigration policies” (Vats 430). Historically, the most scrutinized depiction was the character of I. Y. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961), played by the legendary actor Mickey Rooney. While the portrayal at the time was praised for the performance, it has been the central image for yellowface due to its Caucasian actor and reliance on ethnic stereotypes.

Whitewashed: According to Gabriel, “whitewash refers to the process of cultural bleaching” (Gabriel 5). As a verb, whitewashing, in the paper, is used to describe the Americanization of original cultural concepts to either aid in understanding for other people or make these concepts more appealing and relatable to a western/caucasian audience. Oftentimes, the real meaning of the concept or idea is either partly or fully lost when whitewashed. As an adjective, for example a whitewashed person, it is used to describe someone who is known to deliberately abandon

part(s) of their culture to fulfill their desire to fit into the norm due to embarrassment or shame for one's culture.

For example, Jon M. Chu's adaptation of Kevin Kwan's novel, *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), initiated a turning point in Hollywood in terms of Asian representation and Asian storytelling. Prior to the premiere of *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), news sources released the cast list of Asian actors planning to star in the film. Among famous cast members like Michelle Yeoh, Kevin Jeong, and Awkwafina, was Henry Golding -- a British-Malaysian actor as the film's male lead. Media followers responded with criticism regarding Golding's casting as Nick Young due to his mixed race background. In Kwan's novel, Nick Young is full Asian. Golding's half Malaysian and half British heritage sparked controversy and a debate on whether Golding was Asian enough for the role. Critics raised concerns on whether whitewashing Nick Young's character was due to the perceived lack of sexual appeal a full Asian man might have in the eyes of mainstream American viewers. The question: Are Hollywood and American audiences ready for a fully Asian male protagonist and love interest? Where exactly do Golding and other mixed race actors fit into Hollywood? Efforts to increase Asian representation in mainstream media continues to be a slow, frustrating progression.

Community: According to Merriam-Webster, a community is defined as "a group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society" and "a body of persons or nations having a common history or common social, economic, and political interests" ("Community"). In Asian American the term is often attributed to "geographic localities that incorporate people, places, and institutions that have an affinity to one another or intricate connections" (Võ 31). The idea of "sameness" within a community is commonly viewed

as unifying (Võ 31). However, the idea of a community with the “same” characteristics “can be exclusionary and divide” causing the term to be viewed as “beneficial and affirming” in some scenarios, and as “oppressive and constrictive” in others (Võ 31).

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