

Challenge, Breakthrough and Normalization: Racial Identity Negotiation for Asian American Actors with the Case of John Cho

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Abstract: Asian American actors always face the issue of racial identity negotiation. Specifically, they are often depressed by the presence of films and some Asian stereotypes. However, John Cho breaks this barrier by acting as the protagonist in various genres and being regarded as one of the most representative Asian American actors. Therefore, this study analyses his career process as three stages for repositioning racial identity: subverting the Asian stereotypes, breaking the underrepresentation, and treating race as background to contribute one of the possibilities for renegotiating racial identity in the American mainstream to the research field.

1. Introduction

Race has long been a widely discussed topic for stars working in American society. Mixed race imagery has been an enduring and powerful trope of U.S. culture, deployed to convey popular conceptions about national identity, social norms, and political entitlement. [1] As biracial evolve, more and more actors and actresses of mixed race display their ethnic background in their publicity. However, there are still numerous misunderstandings because of biased performance on screen. This gap soon represents the conventional Orientalist construction of film characters, bringing out the topic of racial identity interpretation between cross-racial stars and local spectators.

Another part of composing stars' racial identity is the process of identity negotiation. The concept of identity negotiation applies in educational and social contexts. William B. Swann, Jr. treats identity negotiation from a social perspective, stating that people would strive to enhance their self-concepts rather than maintain their self-opinions.[2] Cassandra Jo Groen views it from an educational perspective, regarding the process of identity negotiation as the transformation from 'outsider' to 'insider'. In the author's frame, students iteratively define, adjust, and readjust definitions to balance themselves and the learned disciplinary professional identity of the civil engineering profession. With this in mind, we could have known that identity negotiation is the process of defining self-position, conducting self-management and condensing self-knowledge to gain acknowledgment from society. It is a process to fit into certain groups.

Recently, John Cho's debut novel '*Troublemaker*' which is out in paperback, centers on the racial

conflict of an Asian American boy. As a famous actor, John Cho freely shared his opinions about the racial recognition of Asian American in numerous interviews. Indeed, he has captured gorgeous achievements with his fruitful works and unique performance. Cho is not only the first Asian American actor to be cast as a romantic lead in the American romantic sitcoms *Selfie*, but also the first Asian American actor to be the protagonist in the thriller *Searching*. From Hikaru Sulu in *Star Trek* to Max Park in *Don't Make Me Go*, he has expanded the margin of Asian actors' possibilities in the American film industry despite being confined to Asian American actors' typical representations. Having gained fame from *American Pie*, *Star Trek*, and *Columbus*, he certainly leaves a deep impression among audiences for his excellent performance and unique racial identity. Cho has built an iconic career which makes him one of the most prominent Asian actors in the American mainstream. Based on these facts, we could acknowledge that he is a nearly perfect case in discussing Asian American actors' racial identity negotiation. Therefore, this study will examine the process John Cho shapes himself to debunk the stereotypes and renew his self-image in the American mainstream.

2. Literature Review and theoretical framework

Stars have always been a connection with society by pondering reflections about social issues. For a long time, because of biased Asian American screen images, their racial identity is being misconstrued, which formed a causal chain. Related to this chain, studies in these 20 years mainly focus on revealing the racial inequality of minor groups by depicting features of their performances. A strong and critical body of research and theorization already exists on enduring tropes that limit the discussion surrounding Asian American subjectivity, including work on the Model Minority and Asian American film activism post-1960s. [3] Nonetheless, previous studies have not yet focused on the process of breaking this chain for racial identity negotiation based on Asian Americans' screen image, which means that none of these studies has explained the process of repositioning, readjusting, and redressing ethnic identity. Therefore, this chapter will combine previous research about Asian Americans' image and racial identity negotiation for further analysis.

2.1 Asian American performance

Compared to racial identity, the study of Asian American representation concentrates on pointing out whitewashing by defaming Asian Americans. *The Marginalization and Stereotyping of Asians in American Film* examines attempts of reshaping Asians' image in several films. [4] In this essay, the author pointed out the marginalization and stereotyping of Asian Americans' screen image. Marginalization refers to few opportunities for performing in American-made films; Stereotyping, also called Asianness, refers to erasing of individual characteristics and placing biased understandings to the group. In general, these misunderstandings set the barrier to racial identity negotiation for Asian film stars in American society.

2.2 Racial identity

Racial identity is a term that refers broadly to how individuals define themselves concerning race and/or ethnicity. [5] Traditionally, researchers explain racial identity through sociological and psychological approaches. The racial identity model provided by the National Museum of African, American History & Culture categorizes majority ethnic groups' tolerance into five levels: conformity, dissonance, resistance and immersion, introspection, and integrative awareness. [6] Unfortunately, according to the study by Jennifer S. Hunt, Abigail M. Folberg, and Carey S. Ryan, TOR (tolerance of racism) reflects a passive orientation to racism leading to views of macro-level discrimination.

This means that racial identity is still a controversial issue related to mainstream perceptions.[7]

With the previous studies in mind, this paper analyzes how John Cho successfully breaks the stereotypes, winning audiences' favor to become the ever-made-history Asian American actor. This study will examine the process for breaking the Asianess, Underrepresentation and hyperrace which perpetuate the assumption that Asian American actors are unimportant and unsuitable in American-made films. This paper will also be about the process of redefining racial identity instead of getting trapped in an old-fashioned Asian image.

3. Breaking the Asianess barrier

For John Cho, the first stage for redefining racial identity is breaking 'Asianess.' Asianess refers to the erasure of personalities. In the film industry, many Asian actors are often depicted as nerds and Asian actresses have to play roles serving as the object of white men's appreciation. Asian American- and nearly all marginalized - actors are not granted the privilege of choosing and curating their star type, for the most part, as their skin color or other physical non-white/standard features identify them immediately within the social type of their real-life identity. [8] However, John Cho, to a certain extent, subverted the Asianness stereotypes, shooting various kinds of films confronting Asianness.

Besides acting in American popcorn comedies as common practice for Asian Americans, John Cho differs from others in shooting some films that intentionally showcase unique Asian characteristics. In his early works, *Yellow* speaks of the juxtaposition in facing the generation gap, psychological changes, and cultural conflict; *Better Luck Tomorrow* transfers complicated circumstances for suburban-growing Asian Americans; *Pavilion of Women* tries to express the depressed love in 20th century China. All these early films not only distinguish them from traditional popcorn films in which Asian actors are waiters, restaurant owners, and passers-by but also establish vivid Asian images.

Yellow could be regarded as a primary attempt for elevating Asian American voices with refreshing narratives of Asian American teenagers. Telling a story about eight ready-to-graduate Korean Americans raising money in one night, *Yellow* expresses more about the dilemma of self-identification of Asian Americans. Contrasting to what Asian actors presented in used films---wearing thick glasses and burying their heads in studying, *Yellow* depicts teenagers saying 'no' to their parents and their crazy behaviors as the farewell to adolescence. Discarding the obsolete, depressed, and dark tone, the eight teenagers scour the city's streets, beaches, and bars with scare and comic representation. "Yellow," which tends to ramble some, is revved up by its knockout indie rock/hip-hop score. [9] Indeed, this film is definitively punching the Asianess stereotype by exploring broader topics of teenagers' psychological issues and vividly depicting Asian Americans.

If *Yellow* is said to be an exploration of negotiating Asian Americans' identity, then *Better Luck Tomorrow* further arouses the reposition of Asian Americans. When the cult classic premiered 20 years ago, it showed that Asian Americans can be whomever they want to be. [10] Instead of a stereotypical portrait, *Better Luck Tomorrow* shapes more contrasting and complex characters. They are intelligent, rebellious, and lost, they are standing on the edge between the dark and light side, and they are far more alive. Later reflecting, John Cho shared, "I look upon those days with some nostalgia because those films [*Yellow*, *Shopping for Fangs*, and *Better Luck Tomorrow*] were pushing against a membrane that was never entirely broken, but it felt great to be a part of the pushing. The era was big with possibilities. I'm proud of it. I'm proud there was a push then." [11] In this film, John Cho speaks with plain Asianess while starring more complex and dynamic characters.

Pavilion of Women may not be regarded as a 'success' in most critics' eyes for low box offices, but it could still be acknowledged as an attempt for bringing Asians 'alive on screen' by representing Chinese aesthetics. Located in China, the stop-less rain, traditional qipao clothing, and Chinese

calligraphy present China in the 20th century. Like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, Pavilion of Women* tells the story of unique Chinese aesthetics. The depressed love is conveyed in letters, said in glances, and transmitted by necklaces. Differentiating bold Western love, Fengmo Wu, which John Cho played, expressed his appreciation through seemingly unintended poems. For Westerners, Watching "Pavilion of Women" is a curiously anachronistic experience, like encountering an old Bette Davis picture redone in color and at high volume. [12] Although it has not evoked waves, this film still made a step in subverting stereotypes by showing Asians' understanding of beauty and love.

4. Breaking the underrepresentation to stand in the middle

With early attempts at breaking the barrier, Cho won chances for more presence on screen. Underrepresentation means being marginalized, with no opportunity to take leading roles in films. In another way, it is termed as being the 'other.' Like standing outside, the actor is always the other watching the plot going without little of his contribution. For all these years, Asian American seldom starred as plot pushers. Many of them are just servers, laundry keepers, and cab drivers. To some extent, the recurrence of the orientalized 'other' enhances the "visibility/racial invisibility" of whites. However, John Cho surprisingly beat this phenomenon. He leaves an impression by being 'somebody' in *Harold & Kumar* series, *American Pie Reunion*, and other works. It is appropriate to say that he has walked a long way to stand in the middle of the stage.

In his early acting period, John Cho starred in mostly comedy films. With *Shopping for Fangs* marking the debut of his acting career, John Cho sticks to playing in comedy films. Like numerous actors, John Cho started from zero to earn chances to show up in shots and wait for chances to be seen by American audiences. Until 1999, he acted as the MILF guy in *American Pie*, which made him remembered by a group of American audiences. It could be considered as his cornering presence. "I was never Matt Dillon hanging out on a street corner getting discovered by a casting director. My real break was *American Pie*." John Cho shared, 'It did flip the whole thing. From that came *Harold & Kumar*. Sometimes little surprises come, like *Selfie*.' [13]

Later around 2010, he proceeded his way into comedy films. *Harold & Kumar* marks the innovation with two actors of different minority ethnic groups acting as protagonists. This unconventional presence symbolizes the initial attempt for more shown-up of actors of minor ethnicity. "Its posture towards race is to laugh at it," Cho explained to *The Guardian*. "Instead of elevating it, it took the stereotypes and turned the sock inside out. Looking back, I think we were ahead of our time a little bit." [14] Indeed, John Cho has explored a unique way starting from comedy films for being recognized and remembered by American audiences.

Besides his performance, what might be exceptionally surprising for boosting John Cho's presence is the *#Starringjohncho* campaign. In 2016, a digital strategist launched the campaign, asking for more voices supporting more Asian Americans' presence on screen. They replaced the Hollywood blockbusters with John Cho's images by using Photoshop. This movement directly challenges whitewashing in the American mainstream. For John Cho himself, it is a surprise for more people to see him since he stands at the center representing this issue. Responding to the campaign, John Cho replied moderately, stating that it is not just about him and that he needs to dig deeper. [15] But as for the influence on him, especially his presence, this campaign laid the foundations for a more tolerant atmosphere for Asian American actors and actresses. John Cho also proved this with more of his breaking-through works.

5. Treating race as background

After early features intentionally individualizing Asian Americans, Cho shifted focus to a more naturalized performance, in which characters intrigue audiences not with their ethnicity but their

unique stories. The naturalization conveys far deeper than arousing Westerners' attention since it takes more effort to shape the actors' self-identification. As John Cho said, 'A movie that treats race in the background feels more authentic...' He also proved that by normalizing the character set and exploring the whole film gamut.

In the normalization of ethnicity, one of the breakthroughs goes with *Columbus*. As Jin's father fell ill suddenly, Jin stayed in Columbus and developed a fantastic friendship with Casey, a local girl. The sophistication of this movie derives from a natural but unique portrait of aesthetics. If *Pavilion of Women* represents Chinese aesthetics with classical objects, then *Columbus* made it a step further to embody Asian Americans' aesthetics. Unlike styles with an antique feel, Jin felt a sense of loss and tininess in the modern, framed city. By walking with Casey, they shared loss and brightened the other. In this movie, the core lies in breaking the cold and dark frame to find self-value. Neglecting ethnicity shows an ideal world for healing themselves.

After *Columbus*, Cho's surprise comes with more movies like *Searching* and *Don't Make Me Go*. In *Searching*, he makes history as the first mainstream thriller headlined by an Asian American actor in Hollywood. *Don't Make Me Go*, premiered in 2022, another time proved his influence as an ethnic actor in the mainstream. But more than just praises and discussions, these two movies proceed on shaping an earnest personality. By acting in different genres, Cho convinces audiences with his natural performances. His later pieces make a step toward establishing his self-identity as an actor with fruitful works and indefinite possibilities.

Today, John Cho is more likely to be treated as an ambassador representing Asian Americans in Hollywood. To stabilize fame, he knows the guideline that treats race as the background and intrigues audiences to discover the mysterious Asian American culture. Just as he said in an interview, "...But a movie that treats race in the background feels more authentic, because while the rest of mainstream society in America looks at you and sees solely the color of your skin, internally people don't think about their race throughout the course of a day." He added, "Other identities are much more forefront in your conception of yourself." [16]

6. Conclusion

From nobody to somebody, John Cho finally merged into the American mainstream and became one of the most famous Asian American actors with the primary attempt of early attempts for breaking Asianness, middle-stage seeking for presence, and finally treating race as background. This study analyzes Cho's way of the process of racial identity negotiation. In the first stage, Cho tried to subvert Asians with features like *Yellow*, *Better Luck Tomorrow*, and *Pavilion of Women*. Intended to break the Asianess image and shape more rounded characters, the former two features bring Asian American issues on screen, and the last one presents Asians in another way by introducing Chinese aesthetics. In the second stage, Cho started to grab chances to win more presence on screen. By starring in *American Pie* and *Harold & Kumar*, he leaves an impression on more local audiences. Finally, Cho establishes his self-identity by normalizing character settings and exploring all genres. With Jin in *Columbus* and the father in *Searching*, he builds the individualized image with his natural performance instead of an ethnic gimmick.

However, since John Cho is only one out of a hundred in global cinema, this article is still short in figuring out a comprehensive way for vast Asian American actors to break the silence. Plus, this essay focuses on John Cho, so the points listed in it may not apply to Asian American actresses. It is more prospective to conduct further research on applicable processes for racial identity negotiation with both Asian American actors and actresses.

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