**Reading Response #2**

**Evaluating Representations of Asian Americans in Cinema**

This paper will explore Asian ethnicities as a whole, varied intersectional representations, and evaluate controversial presentations of Asian/Asian Americans in 21st century media. Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham’s book *Asian Americans and the Media* (2009) chronicles the constructions of Asian stereotypes as a direct result from colonialism, arguing that Asian men and women have been historically downplayed in mainstream cinema. *Minari* (2021) directed by Lee Isaac Chung evaluates themes of Asian Americans chasing the American dream, searching for one’s belonging in a foreign country, and finding one’s identity against the expectations of their motherland traditions. Contributing to post-colonialists’ debates of Asian representations in “banana movies, yellow on the outside but white inside,” these texts point out the common trends of Asian image as a social construction influenced by colonialism, which in terms defines them as a historically inferior ethnicity to the westernized cultures (Tsoi 2018).

Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham, the co-authors of *Asian Americans and the Media*, specializes in critical cultural studies within media, specifically regarding Asian and Asian American representations. Chapter four of *Asian Americans and the Media* expands upon the enterprise of the two authors, who decipher common themes of Asian/Asian Americans as the “impotent” or “unattractive” side character in comparison to their superior, white counterpart. Because mainstream cinema continues to feed audiences problematic and limited depictions of Asian/Asian American men and women, the authors urge the audiences to challenge the assumption that the creators are portraying the most honest and accurate representations; but rather, they highlight a method that takes an intersectional outlook that seeks to interpret “race, sexuality, and gender as a logical, interlocking social phenomena” (Ono and Pham 2009; Ch. 4).

*Minari* (2021) directed by Lee Isaac Chung examines themes of Asian/Asian American intersectionalities within Korean American immigrants pursuing the American dream. Despite the fact that the film was released in the United States, it was awarded the Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film. *Minari* highlights the reluctant audience’s reception to Asian American protagonists who are confronted with common “American” issues relating to finance and conflating identities. Lee proposes that Asian immigrants who travel to the United States, expect to successfully chase their dreams, clinging on to distorted hopes and idealizations that the dominant western countries can fulfill their desires. However, Lee emphasizes the tragedies of what occurs when one becomes too greedy and blind to their family and traditions.

Ono and Pham argue that Asian/Asian American social constructions are heavily influenced by colonialism, perpetuating ambivalent stigmas that ultimately prevents progression and diversity of Asian characters and tropes. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, colonialism is a term that “involves the subjugation of one person to another” and evaluates their political, territorial, and imperial dominance and maintenance over generations (Khon and Kavita 2017). Often defined interchangeably with imperialism and paired with Confucianism – the belief of having good morals, virtues, and humility to their ancestors and family – Ono and Pham agree that colonialism has established gender-based tropes, stemming from the “same idea/binary structure,” that constructs Asian women as “aesthetically pleasing” and “speechless” or even as “exotic” and “enticing,” whereas Asian men are presented as “predatory figures,” “tyrannical,” or “cruel in their treatment of their women” (Ono and Pham 2009; Tiwald 2020). This is certainly the case in *Minari* where Jack Yi (Steven Yeun) is portrayed as a romantically undesirable, self-centered character who treats his wife as his subordinate, fails to obtain a financially stable occupation, and lacks to fulfill his role as a father. Colonialism suggests that Asian men are typically less favored or an “inferior romantic competitor, ultimately forgotten or eliminated (as a side character)” because of recurring tropes associated with “loathsome, undesirable, barbaric, or uncivilized” connotations (Ono and Pham 2009). Lee intertwines the idea of colonialism by presenting inferior Asian characters such as David Yi (Alan Kim) who has a critical heart condition that prevents him from doing menial tasks such as running or playing with friends. This shows that contemporary films still reject complex identities of Asian American men past their “inferior” representations, which in terms defines them as “incompatible with Western morals” and non-progressive (Hughes, Slide 14).

Ono and Pham also discuss how mainstream cinema manipulates what and how images appear on the screen to the extent that the presented images become a “new normative” accepted by the audience. Lee borrows this idea of selective imaging by repetitively displaying a father-centric storyline, with women playing the supportive role that is less contributive to the plot. According to Patricia Hill and Darrell Hamamoto, the style of “controlling images” – “images that appear so often that it becomes a normative” – is a marketing strategy used by creators who attempt to impose a certain stereotype upon the audience in a short duration. Lee borrows the ideas of controlling what tropes are presented and experiments with characters that both meets yet challenges the notion that Asian women must play the “dialectic of the Lotus Blossom, Madame Butterfly, or Lady Dragon” (Ono and Pham 2009). For example, Asian women in *Minari* have juxtaposing dialectics like the passive mother and the crude grandmother, but those ambivalent tropes paint Asian women in self-destructing ways that depict this notion that all Asian women fit into two restrictive categories – either pure or vulgar. As Ono and Pham compares the Lotus Blossom and Madame Butterfly as “more self-sacrificial to the point giving up her life for the man” and Lady Dragon as “untrustworthy” and “unattractive,” they assert that these tropes and sex-based connotations constructs Asian women as “sex objects” and “lacking in power” (Ono and Pham 2009). This is certainly the case for Monica Yi (Han Ye-ri) who meets the interpersonalities of her Korean heritage as a Lotus Blossom/Madame Butterfly by playing a motherly role, sacrificing her own happiness for the sake of her own family by working as a chicken sexer all throughout the film. By encoding his own childhood experiences as an Asian American male to the boy, portraying realistic social interactions between second generations and their Korean American communities when dealing with cultural differences, Lee presents David’s rebellious acts as a natural reaction of an individual when forced to accept his Korean grandmother who closely replicates the Dragon Lady dialectic – crude, cannot cook, and enjoys playing Hwatu, a traditional Korean card game that typically involves gambling. However, including contradictory dialectics of the more desirable mother and less attractive mother displays women in a problematic light that teaches audiences to prefer the submissive mother.

Ono and Pham additionally assert that Asian/Asian Americans are typically categorized in restrictive, often uncreative, or even mocking methods in the lenses of the binary industry intended for the profitable heterosexual audience. *Minari’s* overlapping representations of women “available to serve men” or as a character that has no significance to the flow of the film strengthens the argument that Asian women are portrayed in a negative light through interrelationships of clashing dialectics that confuse and wrongly educate the audience. Their argument that Asian/Asian American tropes roots from colonialism combined with a strategy of manipulating images on the screen shows that creators promote hypothetically outdated tropes of Asians, ultimately inhibiting them to play a complex role apart from their historically rigid labels. In fact, even titles such as *Minari* promotes mocking images of Asians with metaphors that reflect Asian immigrants as “delicate” or “fresh” like the “edible plant” known as Minari or “calculative” or a “gambler” like the Minari gameplay in Hwatu (Beck 2021). Nevertheless, the authors claim that it is crucial to challenge historical interpretations and stereotypes of Asian/Asian Americans because it assists in avoiding ambivalent dialectics that portray “two contrasting portraits that … represent women in problematic ways” (Ono and Pham 2009).

Works such as *Asian Americans and the Media* and *Minari* evaluates topics of colonialism in Asian representations and power balance between Asian men versus women and East versus West. While Ono and Pham highlight the perspective that colonialism is a hypothetically outdated viewpoint, they argue that colonialist themes establish gender-based tropes, prohibits the development of complex characters, and continues to be told through the lenses of heterosexual creators. They strongly suggest audiences to question whether historical dialectics of Asian women fitting into a crude or passive category and men fitting into unattractive or barbaric category is the optimal label that represents the Asian/Asian American community as a whole. Because a completely unbiased representation is exclusive to an individual’s interpretation, it is crucial to first recognize whether the intent of the creator is authentic or deliberately degrading Asians in restrictive or mocking ways for the sake of the profitable market. This is because questioning naturally promotes positive Asian representations and increase audience tolerance to alternative tropes of Asian/Asian Americans for future cinema. Ono and Pham quintessentially assert that because the dominant culture “renders genders” of Asians as a “convenient sexual object and race as exotic.” Thus, it is significant to take note similar trends of stereotyping one’s race and strive to break racial-based stereotypes in mainstream cinema as a critical audience.

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